

*Popular culture texts  
and young people:  
Making meaning, honouring resistance,  
and becoming Harry Potter*

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Keywords: popular culture, media, masculinity, audience reception, narrative therapy, narrative practice, Harry Potter, Grand Theft Auto

## INTRODUCTION

*Turning off Kanye West's latest testimonial on my stereo (an iPod interface with the 6-speaker Harman Kardon system) in my MINI Cooper S, I (JT) grab my hoodie as I jump out of the car. Pulling the jacket over my pirate T-shirt, I notice that the laces on my Chuck Taylors are loose and I stop to tie them. As I head into the arty-edgy independent coffee shop to meet a student, my phone rings. It's a text from another student wanting to know if I can meet him to talk about his research on Facebook and teen relationships. I order a latte and biscotti from the barista who is sporting a Yankees hat and a retro Underdog T-shirt, find a table, and pull out my iPod (not the same one I left in the car) to check my calendar before texting him back. Having failed to recently sync my iPod with my calendar, I reach into my orange and black messenger bag, pull out my MacBook, and plug the iPod into the computer while opening my laptop's calendar. Picking up the coffee shop's wireless signal, my iTunes begins, unprompted, to download the newest episodes of the podcast subscriptions I maintain. My student walks in, removing her earbuds and stashing her MP3 player in her bag. She heads for the self-serve refrigerator and grabs a Red Bull. Sitting down across from me, she removes her vintage Adidas track jacket, revealing a new tattoo on her forearm, explaining that it's inscribed in homage to her aunt who died two months ago from breast cancer. It's an image of a dove breaking free from a cage. 'I've only got 45 minutes', she says. 'I have to take my nephew birthday shopping for a new video game before we go to see The Dark Knight for his fourth time.'*

As citizens of the global world, we are hard-pressed to escape the influence of mass media and popular culture (Monk, Winslade & Sinclair, 2008). As middle-class professionals from the United States, we live at the epicentre of popular culture's conception, production, and consumption, yet the globalisation of popular culture artefacts through mass media has made both image and product

more and more available to people of even modest incomes and from all corners of the earth (Kellner, 1995). Indeed, popular and media culture has gained hegemonic status, becoming 'perhaps the most powerful cultural force shaping cultural identity today' (Monk, et al., 2008, p.24), unseating familial, cultural, and other traditional shapers of identity. Hence, popular culture operates at the level of discourse and invites critical investigation into the effects of these operations.

As narrative-informed therapists, we are interested in mining the text metaphor embedded within the discourses that shape people's lived experiences. In order to make media texts legible, we draw on the poststructural analysis offered by the discipline of cultural studies. Cultural studies serves as a fitting theoretical ally to narrative therapy, as it relies on poststructuralist approaches to examine cultural and social practices from a political and social justice perspective. Our experience with young people and the ways they read popular culture texts in their own lives has encouraged us to see pop culture as a rich site for the production of identities as well as for development of critical media literacy skills. By positioning ourselves conceptually within the tradition of cultural studies and engaging in the dialogical practices that constitute narrative therapy, we have enjoyed many meaningful conversations with young people about their relationship with pop culture.

Therapists from many theoretical traditions have made note of the importance that pop culture has played in the lives of their clients. Their work has demonstrated how engagement with clients' interest in pop culture has facilitated the therapeutic relationship as well as privileged the unique meanings imbued by clients into their relationship with various artifacts of pop culture and how these engagements have shaped their identities. For example, family therapist Laura Sullivan (2008) has written how she therapeutically uses comic strips to help young children with sleeping problems and night terrors. Lawrence Rubin (2008) has also discussed the importance of popular culture and its potential relevance for clinicians as a means of fostering communication with clients and as a therapeutic resource for self-expression and growth.

Our hopes are to deepen the theoretical scope of practice that leverages client involvement with pop culture by honouring the history of ideas embedded in the scholarly tradition of cultural studies, a tradition which we believe is a suitable theoretical complement to narrative practice.

### **BREAK BINARIES, NOT TELEVISIONS: CHALLENGING THE DISCOURSE ABOUT POP CULTURE AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

Barker (2000) suggests that popular culture produces much of the materials out of which people fashion their identities. These materials include images and messages from the music, TV, film, technology, and fashion industries. Individual ideas about and performances of identity (including those involving gender, race, class, nationality, sexuality, and ethnicity) cannot be separated from the messages and symbols produced by the ubiquitous media enterprises. Individuals are persuaded by media to adopt many of the values and practices endorsed by popular culture, thus encouraging identification with the dominant discourses represented (Miller, 2001). Because popular culture has harnessed hegemonic status as an irrefutable dimension of cultural context, we seek to engage with young people's relationship with popular culture and develop skills in media literacy. We have experienced this as helpful in positioning our efforts to support young people in their negotiation of pop culture's influence, thus mediating potentially harmful messages (e.g., gendered or racialised specifications, pressures toward over-consumption) while leveraging possibilities for productive meaning-making and identity construction.

Adult discourse around young people's consumption of popular culture often presents itself in two ways. One response centres on a kind of 'moral panic', invoking fear that young people are simply hollow dupes blowing helplessly in the winds of Madison Avenue, incapable of negotiating meaning, lacking the capacity for critical discernment, and destined to be forever negatively affected by the things they consume. Much of this panic is driven by traditional 'effects' studies of media influence on young people. Gauntlett (1998) critiques effects studies as deterministic, linear in their design, and imposing of universalised

conclusions at the expense of individual meaning-making by actual consumers. For example, a single media text (such as a song lyric or video game) is isolated and analysed as harmful for all young people, rendering not only a one-size-fits-all interpretation, but also a monolithic constitution of all young people, irrespective of social location or other contextual factors.

Furthermore, this moral panic typically originates from the dominant cultural centre – that of the heterosexual, white, middle-class. This is problematic to us on two counts. First, there is a serious measure of hypocrisy embedded in criticisms about young people's engagement with popular culture coming from this hegemonic social location, as this is the very group of people that produces and promotes the artefacts of pop culture for young people to consume. Secondly, criticisms of young people's consumption of popular culture that originate from white middle-class perspectives invariably cast a pathologising and problematising view of already marginalised young people, typically queer young people and young people of colour. For example, judgement of African-American young men's choice of clothes ignores the importance of an oppressed community constructing identity through fashion that challenges middle-class white ideas of appropriateness. Or, framing queer young people's genderblur representations in psychologised developmental terms as 'adolescent acting out' obfuscates the political statement constituted by courageous performances of transgressive identities. As therapists, we maintain that *not condemning something is not the same as endorsing it*, as we seek to invite clients into rich and complex conversations that honour individual meanings while encouraging critical thinking.

The other common response involves a 'kids will be kids' stance, one that seems simultaneously dismissive of young people and their interests while also embodying a troubling lack of adult involvement, critical thinking, and accountability. One example of this theme includes 'boys will be boys' – in response, for example, to engagement with misogynistic lyrics or violent video games, thus rendering unchallenged hegemonic masculinity and reproducing naturalised accounts of manhood. Other common totalising discourses invoked might be

'girls like to shop' (dismissing girls' capacity to engage critically with fashion and consumerism) or 'teenagers have no social skills' (as an alternative to exploring the meaning young people make of internet, social networks, and texting-based relationships).

Many of the adults we've consulted express feeling overwhelmed by the ever- and fast-changing world of technology and pop culture, a world that young people typically navigate with greater confidence and speed. We have employed several practices that can help adults engage in richer discussions about their young person's relationship with pop/media culture. For example, we deconstruct the 'effects' studies (noted above) that often shape many adults' perceptions of pop culture. This often creates space for adults to ask young people how they are personally experiencing pop culture in their lives. Also, we may invite adults to re-member any relationship they may have had with popular culture artefacts as young people, as well as to consider how they engage with pop culture as an adult. It has been both interesting and fun for young people to hear adults in their lives reflect on this.

We are concerned about blatant commoditisation of young people and cavalier attitudes about violence that are promoted by dominant popular media culture. We recognise the racialised and gendered nature aspects of what is often sold to children, and we are troubled by the trail of oppressive messages. Hall (1980), for instance, has cautioned against over-valourising the consumer-audience of popular culture and their capacity for extracting their own meanings, due to the power of the corporate media system to reinforce hegemonic, capitalist ideology. Because we hold these concerns while also seeing pop culture as a potential site for meaningful production of identities, we strive for an approach that embraces the complexities of young people and their experiences which acknowledges that young people can learn how to mediate the effects of what they consume. Engaging with cultural studies has provided us not only a theoretical foundation for troubling the discursive binary surrounding young people's consumption of pop culture, but also skills for negotiating meaning and mediating the multiple effects of pop culture with clients.

## READING MEDIA TEXTS FOR THERAPEUTIC ENDS

Cultural studies is an academic discipline which combines political economy, communication, sociology, social theory, literary theory, media theory, film studies, cultural anthropology, philosophy, museum studies, and art history/criticism, to study cultural phenomena in various societies (Barker, 2000). Cultural studies researchers often concentrate on how a particular phenomenon relates to matters of ideology, nationality, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and/or gender. A key feature of cultural studies is examining its subject matter in terms of cultural practices and their relation to power. For example, a study of a subculture (such as white working-class youth in London) would consider the social practices of the youth as they relate to the dominant classes. It has the objective of understanding culture in all its complex forms, and of analysing the social and political context in which culture manifests itself and is both the object of study and the location of political criticism and action. For example, not only would a cultural studies scholar study an object or media text, but she/he would connect this study to a larger, progressive political project. In addition, cultural studies attempts to expose and reconcile the division of knowledge, to overcome the split between tacit cultural knowledge and objective (universal) forms of knowledge. Lastly, it has a commitment to an ethical evaluation of modern society and to a radical line of political action. Since cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field, its practitioners draw on a diverse array of theories and practices.

Cultural studies insists that culture must be studied within the social relations and system through which culture is produced and consumed. Therefore, the study of culture is intimately bound up with the study of society, politics, and economics. Cultural studies shows how media culture articulates dominant cultural ideologies. It conceives of American culture and society as a contested terrain with various groups and ideologies struggling for dominance (Kellner, 1995). As a conceptual framework, cultural studies is valuable because it provides some tools for critical reading and interpretation of culture. Informed by a critical, multicultural, and multi-perspective approach,

cultural studies seeks to invite people to become more sensitive to how relations of power and domination are 'encoded' in cultural texts, such as those of television, film, and video games. However, it also suggests how people can resist the dominant encoded meanings and produce their own critical and alternative readings. Cultural studies can show how media culture attempts to manipulate and indoctrinate people, and thus can empower individuals to negotiate the dominant meanings in media cultural products and to produce their own meanings. It can also point to moments of resistance, contradiction, and criticism within media culture and thus help promote development of more critical consciousness.

At its best, cultural studies contains a three-fold project of examining popular culture (Ang, 1996). This comprehensive approach avoids too narrowly focusing on one dimension of the project to the exclusion of others. To avoid such limitations (such as those rendered by 'effects studies'), cultural studies first examines how media texts are produced and distributed (known as 'political economy' approaches), the meanings and messages encoded in those texts (through textual analysis) and, finally, the meanings that consumers make of cultural texts (through audience reception studies).

Due to the comprehensive approach to studying media culture that encompasses political economy, textual analysis, and audience reception, cultural studies provides critical and political perspectives that enable individuals to dissect the meanings, messages, and effects of dominant cultural forms. Cultural studies is thus part of a critical media pedagogy that empowers people to gain autonomy over their culture in their struggle for both individual and political change.

## OF MEDIA AND MEN ...

As a clinical supervisor (DN) of a mental health program for young people and families, I often accompany therapists on home visits to conduct a consultation or do co-therapy. On one such occasion, I met with Victor, a sixteen-year-old Latino male who was living with his sole-parent mother, Maria, and his seven-year-old brother, Sam. Maria's husband, Victor's father, was in prison on a drug offence and had been violent to both Victor and his mother. Victor was referred to therapy due to a

history of violence at school and home. Victor had assaulted his mother on several occasions when she had attempted to discipline him. In addition, school officials were concerned that Victor was affiliating with gang culture. The counsellor who was working with Victor invited me to conduct a consulting session to discuss issues of masculinity.

When I arrived at Victor's home for the consultation, he was in his room playing a popular video game, *Grand Theft Auto*. The gameplay consists of a mixture of action, adventure, and driving. Much controversy exists around this game because of its adult nature and violent themes, such as killing police officers and sex workers. The series focuses on many different protagonists who attempt to rise through the criminal underworld, although their motives for doing so vary in each game. The antagonist in each game is commonly a character who has betrayed them or their organisation or someone who has the most impact impeding their progress.

As I watched Victor play the game, I was struck by the graphic images of violence, particularly towards sex workers. When I asked Victor how often he played video games, he replied, 'almost daily'. He was particularly proud of his video game collection which including other top-selling violent games such as *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter*. Victor's mother came into the room at some point to express her concern with the games, believing that they glamorise violence towards authority figures and disrespect women. Victor adamantly disagreed stating that, 'it's only a game; it's not real!' Before I knew it, I was a witness to the conflict between Maria and Victor as Maria threatened to take his video games away while Victor starting yelling at his mother.

The argument between Victor and Maria mirrors the larger, societal debate on the issue of video games and their impact on children. Some media activists, politicians, and parent groups claim that video games such as *Grand Theft Auto* naturalise traditional gender roles and violent behaviour (Diaz, 1998). In contrast, media scholar Henry Jenkins (1998) argues that video games can be a site of gendered play spaces that offer teens a fantasy of empowerment and transgression. Video games, from this point of view, are tools that young people use in a variety of ways – some productively resist the

hegemonic messages of video games whereas others uncritically embrace the sexist and hegemonic ideologies and images.

Holding both points of view simultaneously, I was interested in exploring the unique meanings that *Grand Theft Auto* held for Victor (related to the cultural studies analysis of meaning-making, 'audience reception studies', mentioned earlier). Victor shared that he had been bullied at school on several occasions and he found playing the game a 'release' from the tension of school. Also, 'killing' police officers in a virtual world was a way for Victor to express his anger at a racist criminal justice system that put his father in prison. Hence, Victor's meaning of playing *Grand Theft Auto* confirms Jenkins' notions of the potential transgressive and empowering potential of violent video games.

Victor's mentioning of his father opened up space for me to discuss masculinity; in particular, we discussed how his father was recruited by what Victor called 'macho masculinity'. Macho manhood, according to Victor, meant acting 'tough' and 'treating women badly'. Using textual analysis methodologies, I asked him if *Grand Theft Auto* celebrated macho manhood. Somewhat grudgingly, Victor agreed that the video game reinforced notions of a violent manhood, the kind of masculinity that his father practiced.

As our conversation continued, Victor discussed his ideas about manhood along with his values, intentions, and preferences – many that ran counter to his father's practices and some of the performances of masculinity valorised in *Grand Theft Auto*. Maria was brought into the conversation as the three of us explored ways that they could learn to respect each other and take their relationship back from conflict. Maria was impressed with Victor's intentions to step away from traditional notions of manhood and violence. Victor stated that he felt support from his mother. They both agreed that this was a unique outcome that was mutually meaningful. Because he felt his mother was 'truly listening' to him, Victor openly shared his struggles to protect himself in a school environment where bullying, racism, the threat of violence, and harassment, were commonplace. In response to this context, Victor felt that he needed to 'put on' the tough guy image and/or gang member image to survive in his peer culture.

Victor reassured his mother that his survival strategy did not mean that he was actually interested in becoming a gang member. Maria was relieved to hear this and then shared that she had recently noticed some times when Victor had treated both her and his younger sibling more respectfully.

Before the meeting ended, I enquired if Victor knew which company produced *Grand Theft Auto*. Having no awareness of the owner and distributor of the video game, Victor looked at the box the game was packaged, stating, 'It's owned by Rockstar Games'. Soon we were discussing that, in all likelihood, Rockstar Games was owned by white men who had no real interest in Victor's life other than manipulating him and taking his money. I then asked Victor the kind of video game he would design if he controlled the means of production. 'It would be a lot less violent, I know that for sure', Victor imagined. Hence, our political economy investigation created space for Victor to further resist dominant white, violent masculinity.

My conversation with Victor began with respectful, non-judgemental enquiry into his unique meanings and use of video games, along the lines of audience reception studies. Honouring Victor's local meanings steered our discussion into a textual analysis of the game, with a particular focus on representations of violent masculinity embedded in *Grand Theft Auto*. Deconstructing the images in the game eventually guided us into a political economy examination of *Grand Theft Auto*, thus motivating Victor to become cognizant of the power that video game companies have in manipulating culture. Victor's new critical awareness of video game texts later inspired him to broaden his media literacy skills to interpret and resist other cultural texts such as music, advertisements, and movies.

## **BECOMING HARRY POTTER: THE MAGIC OF MEANING-MAKING THROUGH TEXTUAL POACHING**

I (JT) met Isaac when he was six and had just finished kindergarten. Isaac and his mom, Angela, had gone to see *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. This was the first time they had gone to one of the Harry Potter films. Angela had read to Isaac all of the previous books in the series, and credited Isaac's love of stories and his ahead-of-schedule reading abilities to this practice.

Angela described herself as a 'working single parent' and explained that she had received a small cash gift and decided to treat Isaac to an afternoon at the movies. She did not know how dark the film was compared to the Harry Potter stories they had read together. Angela expressed guilt and embarrassment and worried that she was 'a bad mom' for taking her small child to such a disturbing film.

Angela went on to explain that, after viewing the film, Isaac began suffering from nightmares and fears that something would happen to her. As she spoke, he ran around my office with my magic wand yelling 'Petro Petroleum!' Thinking that this sounded like the incantation 'Expecto Patronum' used by Harry Potter, I asked Isaac what he thought had brought on the sleepless nights and worry-filled days.

He stopped briefly to provide a very sober response: 'Bad magic.' When I enquired into the nature of this 'bad magic', he talked about the 'dark swirly things' (which I took to be the 'Dementors' from the Potter story) being 'really scary' and that he just couldn't get them out of his head. As he circled my office, waving the wand to the four corners, I asked him where he thought the bad magic came from and why it was making trouble for him. 'Because there isn't any good magic so the bad magic takes over.' This struck me as quite reasonable as well as a good example of the practice of 'textual poaching': inserting oneself into a media text. Distilled down to the purest meaning available to a six-year-old, the Harry Potter stories are about 'good magic vs. bad magic' and Isaac was clearly inserting himself into that plot line.

I commented on his use of my wand and his incantation of 'Petro Petroleum' – 'is that some kind of magic?', I asked. 'Yes – it's Harry's magic – good magic', Isaac said. He continued, 'But Harry has help to do good magic'. 'Yes he does; his friends help out a lot, don't they?', I responded. He nodded and stood in front of me, wand at rest. He talked about Harry's friends, Hermione and Ron. I asked him who helps him with stuff. 'My mom, but I don't think she has magic.'

I checked with his mom who, in fact, reported a history of magic dating back to her mom. 'Oh, Isaac may not know it', Angela said, 'but both grandma and I have some good magic in us.' Angela told a

brief story about a time when she was a little girl and her mom 'used secret kisses and special hugs to keep monsters out of my room at night'. Isaac was sitting down now, holding quietly onto my wand and looking at his mom as though she had just become a new person right before his eyes – as if, perhaps, by magic.

'If Mom can help,' I asked, 'if she can use her good magic, like grandma used for her, what kind of help would you want?' 'She has to come with me when the dark swirly things come – they can get you when you are alone but not together.' Again, Isaac demonstrated his capacity for understanding the original text while also inserting himself in it in order to produce his own conclusions. I continued to ask questions. 'What else do you need to have good magic?' 'I don't know.' 'What do Harry and his friends have?' 'A wand.'

I nodded at the wooden stick with the stars and moon attached to it in his hand. 'Well', I ventured, 'it looks like you found one there – do you want to use my wand? I know it has some good magic in it.' I inserted myself into the story, effectively becoming Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, as I joined Isaac and Angela in the text.

'What else does Harry do to make good magic?' I asked. 'A potion.' Isaac was standing up now, interested. 'Like "Petro Petroleum"?', I asked. 'Uh-huh.' 'So, what would be the best way to say your potion to help keep away the bad magic?' 'Mom should say it while I wave the wand. Harry's friend was good at them.' Indeed, Harry's friend, Hermione, was at the head of the Hogwart's class when it came to potions. Angela further contributed her endorsement of the magic-making process by agreeing to stay with Isaac at night until the good magic worked (which Isaac figured would happen before he started first grade in the fall). She also agreed to recite the potion with her eyes closed as Isaac instructed.

Isaac drew some pictures of the 'dark swirly things' and said he was going to 'leave them in the sunlight at the park because they didn't like it there'. As a final contingency plan, he took home Scorch, my dragon Beanie Baby, who I guaranteed had special magic that helped kids sleep at night. Isaac was certain that Scorch 'probably flew under Harry's broom during Quidditch matches'.

We can understand Isaac's experience in many ways and we can look at it through several lenses. From a cultural studies-informed perspective, this story underscores how engagement with Pottermania – a particular artefact of pop culture – opened up doors for a child's imagination and ingenuity and a mother's resourcefulness and competence. These were all leveraged in protest against, ironically, problems that made their way into this family's life through consumption of the very same artefact of pop culture. Isaac was able to construct an identity of personal agency – of a wizard with good magic – in response to a possible identity as a fearful kid unable to sleep at night, while Angela reclaimed her preferred identity as a good mom, one with very special abilities.

## CONCLUSION: MORE THAN SKIN DEEP

She shows me her tattoo and tells the captivating story of how her grandma, a survivor of the Holocaust, asked her when she was only seven, to 'get the same tattoo that grandma put over the camp numbers on her wrist when she was freed'. I know enough Hebrew to know that the ink spells 'tikvah' – hope. 'I turned eighteen and needed to do something that meant something. Kids get tattoos all the time so people thought it was just a thing ... but it really means something, not just the word, but having done it.'

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We (Julie and David) would like to thank Gerald Monk and John Winslade for their support and similar interest in the intersection of popular culture and therapy. We also want to thank some of our mentors in cultural studies including Douglas Kellner, Jay Mechling, John Storey, and Laura Grindstaff.

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