



Station Identification

A course in media literacy teaches young people that the medium is the message. By Lise Funderburg

For high school senior Lani Parrilla, taking a media literacy course has had an unexpected result: he now needs a watch. "I used to turn on the TV and tell you what time it is," he says. "I had this whole thing laid out."

"You, too?" asks fellow student Rebecca Sinclair. "I could listen to Montel and from where he is in his conversation, tell you exactly what time it is, down to the minute."

old transplant from Washington, D.C., launched Media Works in early 1994.

Art Start's main project, staffed by volunteers, brings a rotation of visiting artists and dancers to the city's homeless shelters (see *City Limits*, January 1994). While the program offers flashes of creativity and fun to people living in a typically bleak situation, its impact is vastly constrained by the turbulence around it. Rosenberg realized that to explore material more deeply,

Principal Ellen Kirschbaum welcomed Rosenberg because his approach mirrored her own. "In a society that does not necessarily even value the arts," Kirschbaum says, "we're one of the few 'right brain-left brain' places that says the arts are an intellectual pursuit." Media Works is perfect for her students, who, she notes, have been bombarded by electronic images from the day they were born. "They probably rarely sit in a house that doesn't have something on. For them it's background to life, but they're not always critical."

Too Creative

As soon as Rosenberg got into the classroom, he realized that talking about the material wasn't enough. The students were too creative. "They were itching to do something."

"Most of these students come from really dramatically difficult circumstances, economically and personally," he says. "I think that [with these] young people, especially when they've had to struggle and stick with it and survive and persevere as opposed to folding or being tossed by the wayside or becoming a statistic, there's an intellectual development and strength of character that emerges. In some ways, they're more advanced than kids who come from better economic backgrounds."

After three semesters, Rosenberg found he was spending more time on school paperwork than with his students. So he decided to move the project into a workshop—still for credit, but now held after school and off the premises. Media Works now meets every Wednesday afternoon at Film/Video Arts, a media education center.

In the workshop, students are asked to analyze media and then create it. Rosenberg has them view everything from public service ads for prenatal care to the opening credits for the movie, "Menace II Society." All of it is dissected for meaning: sounds, images, lighting, typeface. In one exercise, students break down a television commercial's audio track. They identify five separate background noises, make a script of the voice-over narration, and analyze how the components come together. Then, with one student acting as director, each of the others takes responsibility for a piece of the soundtrack and recreates the commercial with the TV volume turned off.

The summer before last, armed with a \$3,500 Board of Education grant, students



Jason Goltz

Students in the Media Works program produced a public service video on racism.

Parrilla and Sinclair say they rarely watch TV these days. Since they've learned how to decode images and question their purpose, they are put off by the sameness they see. "I used to really like going to the movies," Sinclair says. Now she gets bored. "I went to go see 'Desperado' and the only thing I could think was: This is a Mexican 'Rambo.'"

Scott Rosenberg, the zealous founder of the four-year-old nonprofit group Art Start—the parent organization for Media Works—couldn't ask for better results. A visual artist himself (he describes his work as minimalist mixed-media), the 32-year-

he needed to find an environment with less turnover and where participants were roughly at the same level; in the shelters, a class could consist of four-year-olds, their parents, and every age in between. Teaching a high school course, Rosenberg hoped, would allow him to use popular media and hip hop culture as a springboard to critical thinking.

He found a school willing to let him in: the New York City Public School Repertory Company, a so-called "last-chance" high school for students who have an interest in the arts but who have had problems in mainstream high schools.

filmed their own public service video, "Protect Your Child Against Racism," which is now in the final stages of editing. Rosenberg would like to pursue similar productions, but money is scarce. Art Start is working on becoming an independent nonprofit, but in the meantime Rosenberg must rely largely on material contributions from media organizations and the dedication of a handful of artists.

Social Commentary

Media Works veterans Parrilla and Sinclair will now mentor incoming students. In a recent workshop, the two demonstrated their new analytical skills. Rosenberg held up a print ad from the Benetton clothing company. Like the rest of the company's controversial ad campaign, this image has little to do with fashion but plenty of social commentary. The ad is simply a photograph of a nude bottom stamped with the letters "H.I.V." and "POSITIVE." Off to the side of the image is a tiny reproduction of the company logo.

"What do you see?" Rosenberg asks. "It's a butt," Sinclair exclaims. Rosenberg begins a volley of questions: What do you see? What are the connections? What are the links? Using the Socratic method, he tries to force his students to take their own intellectual journeys. They reply that dramatic lighting gives the butt depth. It's a "pretty butt" that attracts them, yet the "H.I.V. POSITIVE" puts them off. They say the words look like a cattle brand or maybe a tattoo. The purpose could be to isolate people. Maybe, someone else suggests, to bring a positive association to the message.

"Why did they make this?" Rosenberg asks. "Let's push this a little further."

"Benetton often takes people's prejudice and people's own assumptions and makes it visual," Sinclair says. "You may think something and feel something. But to actually see it is unnerving."

Another artist helping to teach the class, 24-year-old photographer Simon Fulford, takes his turn in the questioning: "When you see Benetton, what do you think of?"

"I think of it as a cool company that just wants everybody together," Parrilla responds. "I mean, yeah, everybody together wearing their stuff."

Sinclair chimes in. "Yeah. Let's unite...wearing Benetton."

Focus and Follow Up

For both students, Media Works has been a welcome relief from past educational experiences. Lani Parrilla says he ended up at Repertory High after, as he puts it, "I was invited to leave my school."

The medical honors program he was in at his last school was overbooked, carrying as many as 37 students in a class, he says. If half were absent, he remembers teachers would repeat the entire lesson the next day. "I found the classes boring," he says, admitting that he ended up cutting many and going to the library where there were computers to explore. "I built a very close relationship with the librarian," he says.

Repertory was a big improvement, he adds. It is a smaller school—teachers can pay more attention to the students—and it offers the media literacy program.

Rebecca Sinclair says Rosenberg has taught her how to focus and follow up. Now, if she calls a college for information and gets no answer the first time, she'll call back until she does. Sinclair came to Repertory after getting "distracted" at another alternative school. "I was cutting and going to parties. That's it, plain and simple. I just got caught up in the trouble."

Their lives may not have completely turned around: Parrilla still considers himself a goof-off, and Sinclair claims she's lazy. But clearly they're both inspired to think more critically, and they like it. When asked to tell the best parts of this experience, one might expect them to choose the glamorous moments that Rosenberg provided: discussions with directors Jonathan Demme and Robert Townsend; bit parts in a television ad; visits to movie sets and museums.

But that's not it, Sinclair says. "It's not so much meeting the people or going to places, but actually learning the things that you don't know. And learning them the way Scott teaches them, you go: I gave myself the answer. I wasn't given the answer. You feel proud and you feel like you've actually accomplished something."

Parrilla agrees. "You give a kid a new tool, a toy, and he's going to go off and run with it. And when it becomes second nature, then he's going to come back for more."

Defying Labels

For Rosenberg, "more" is a plan to teach the students how much they know by making them teachers themselves. He's



Jason Goliz

negotiating with two other high schools to offer the program this spring. One is another last-chance high school, like Repertory, but the other is a school for the "gifted and talented." As teaching assistants, Sinclair and Parrilla will have a chance to defy the labels of who's smart and who's not.

At times, Rosenberg is saddened by how available the students make themselves for his field trips and late night production sessions. "It shows how hungry these kids are," he says. "It's heartbreaking because this project is so small." Yet their attendance tells him something else as well. "It says to me that this is working. This is definitely working." ■

Lise Funderburg is a Brooklyn-based freelance writer.

Rebecca Sinclair and Lani Parrilla now pay close attention to hidden media messages.