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Understanding Media Studies

The New School University

### The Backstory

*Fairy tales, myth, William Blake. Semiotics, rhetoric, Roland Barthes. Otherness, post-colonialism, Tayeb Salih.* These are conceptual strands deeply knitted into my psyche, ones that flash into being when I close my eyes. These are authors and ideas that have shaped me into a restless obsessive who can't quite achieve peace even in the most relaxed of states.

When I think about my life as a child, I see all the essential elements that make up my worldview as an adult. But the child sees only reality, and I lived my worldview in absolute terms. I watched the British children's TV program Playschool as well as Sesame Street, had afternoon tea of scones and actual tea, and ate Sri Lankan rice and curry for dinner. I survived off of Enid Blyton's British boarding school stories and adventure stories and vast quantities of fairy tales. I was officially a resident alien and unofficially, an outsider at school. Piano lessons were to be despised, the Beatles records at home were adored, and Thursdays were reveled in as the best day of the week, with fast food staples like pizza or hamburgers for lunch and The Cosby Show and Family Ties after dinner. These were all the realities of life, and I didn't question them or choose them.

But as I matured, each of these elements that had seemed like foregone cornerstones of my existence receded into abstraction. I realized that I had tastes, that my reality was actually composed of mostly subjective elements. I learned that not everyone felt as much of an outsider within the childish hierarchy of school, and that being a good student was a choice. But grappling with the arbitrary nature of life was eased by a steady diet of books. I could escape the flickering fluorescent lights and the social machinations of girlhood by entering a completely different world through the printed page, where every detail was real, absolute, and under my control. I thought that I would one day die and enter heaven where I would meet all of my favorite characters.

High school brought a new layer of confusion into the mix. I started to try to understand why I liked the things I liked. Why did I still love fairy tales, despite the fact that they were supposed to be limited to kids? What did it mean that I had such an affinity for British cultural products, especially given Britain's prominent place in the colonial history of

Sri Lanka? TV was supposed to be a bad influence on me, so why did I adore Northern Exposure? I started to become politically aware in my personal sphere.

I went from a freshman English classroom that challenged me to think about the rules of American society in terms of race, class, and economics to an honors English class that penalized me for original thinking. I dropped out of the honors program, which proved a deep disappointment to my parents and my first disengagement with the educational system in the US. I read Jonathon Kozol's Savage Inequalities and The Plague by Albert Camus. I became paralyzed by the idea that I was an innocent murderer, and every action I took by being a member of society made me more culpable. At the same time, I was discovering David Bowie and Kate Bush and Britpop bands like James and Pulp, and plumbing the depths of my obsession with myth with Edith Hamilton's Mythology and Diana Wynne Jones' Fire and Hemlock. My mother's anthropological field studies with Cambodian refugees in San Jose and gangs in Long Beach formed a shadowy semi-activist sideshow, a set of theories for me to read about but never to participate in.

By my final year in high school, I had passively consigned my illustrious academic career to the realm of pure fancy – I'd one by one dropped out of all of my AP courses and stopped going to most of my other classes. The few things I had poured my passion into – singing, theatre, film – were not possible careers in the eyes of my parents, and so I never seriously considered them. My attempts at persuading my parents to let me bypass high school and go straight to college through a special program had proven futile. My few listless applications to far off colleges were denied, and I was facing the pointless outcome of my disengagement with the system – junior college and a few more years at home with my parents.

So it was that I began my college years with a lot of confusion and the stunted beginnings of a framework for understanding the world through music, film, and culture. I quickly found that the college classroom was more matched to the pace of my thoughts, and that I had an almost instinctual affinity for British literature. The neoclassical world of John Donne gave way to the romanticism of William Blake and Percy Shelly, which naturally led to Victorian favorites Thomas Hardy and George Elliot, and ultimately to T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land and Doris Lessing's apocalyptic Memoirs of a Survivor. Where to go from there? It turned out there was more than one place to go – a far flung diaspora of countries where colonialism had engraved permanent scars on the psyches of whole peoples. The

literature of Joseph Conrad gave way to Chinua Achebe, Tayeb Salih, and Tsitsi Dangaremba and I began to see how myth and folklore remained relevant far into adulthood, turning up in the most unexpected places. I began similarly exploring film and hungrily consumed films that presented other ways of being like Krzysztof Kieslowski's Trois Couleurs trilogy and Stephen Frears' My Beautiful Laundrette.

I gravitated towards the critical study of media throughout my undergraduate studies in English Literature, but making it never became a huge priority. I thought I would most likely learn and learn until at some point I turned around and taught. My tentative creative writing efforts yielded little results, but my academic writing attracted modest attention and a scholarship. Perhaps academic research would yield a few publications, but I firmly pressed thoughts of making movies or other creative work to the back of my mind.

By the time I graduated college, I was passionately engaged in learning and bound up in the academic machine. I had worked part-time as a tutor and a library assistant and still lived with my parents. There was nothing I wanted more than to escape my existence as I knew it and never come back. So I took a quick TEFL course, got a certificate declaring that I was ready to teach, and moved to France.

As much as I loved being in a new environment, teaching did not turn out to be the vocation I had expected. In fact, it was pretty scary. As a 22-year-old "Sri Lankaise" woman, teaching Parisian professionals Business English was an intimidating prospect. The majority of my students were French men in their fifties without much patience for the games and discussions that dominate modern techniques for teaching English overseas. I'd been expecting a classroom of enthusiastic teens, not impatient executives who expected immediate results.

I probably ended up learning more from my students than they did from me. Through my language school, I taught across a variety of industries, including automotive (Citroën), pharmaceuticals (Aventis), and energy (Electricité de France). At the time, the European energy industry was undergoing a vast deregulation that was about to expand EDF's potential markets to the entire world, and one of my first students was the chief negotiator between the labor unions, the European Union, and EDF. It was a treat to spend an hour each week discussing his work, the company, and the political climate of the time, helping a keen mind find the right words in English to express his opinions.

Another student had just been promoted when I first met her. Her job, which she loved, was to represent the French insurance industry at international conferences, translate the meetings from English to French, and synthesize the results into objectives and guidelines for the entire industry in France. But she also had two young girls, and despite using the national childcare program, quit her job just six months later to take care of them fulltime at the insistence of her husband.

During that year, I learned that each country and society requires a different set of tools and programs to nurture economic and social development, and that long-standing traditions and ways of thinking can negate the impacts of progressive policies. I saw alternatives to the way the US handles issues like health coverage, unemployment, and encouraging economic growth. And I was living with a boyfriend with a whole host of family members in Paris who introduced me firsthand to the lifestyle of the invisible class of illegal immigrants in France. Hemmed in by the expectations of a deeply Catholic family of Sri Lankan in-laws, I quickly realized that life was fast becoming far from ideal.

Since returning to California in 2002, much of my professional experience has been built on public policy projects centered on families in California. At *i.e.* communications, I worked on projects that helped introduce new ideas and initiate debate and discussion on youth violence prevention policy throughout California. I also worked on projects that helped direct more state-level resources to programs assisting emancipating foster youth and explain the contentious issue of standardized testing to Bay Area parents.

My orientation towards understanding how media shapes our culture, language, and thoughts was invaluable as I moved from working on public policy campaigns to managing market research studies focusing on online communication to freelancing as a writer and researcher. But as an artist, I was constantly subordinating creative impulses to stay true to client or company brands and objectives. And although I had trained in both audio and video production, my projects were generally focused on the print medium. These days, I'm struggling to place my previous work in a larger context and set the stage for moving into a more production-oriented career, one that is grounded in an understanding of media theoretical frameworks.

I have also been following the arc of a new brand of films that I see as a unique amalgam of technically and aesthetically interesting filmmaking with socially and politically relevant stories that can push viewers to a more nuanced understanding of the global society.

Even as My Beautiful Laundrette introduced a new perspective on Britain's increasingly complex racial and socioeconomic class structure, films like The Constant Gardener, Dirty Pretty Things, and Eastern Promises and the TV show The Wire have brought social realism to a new place in film. I know I want to add to this emerging body of socially realistic art with a global perspective.

I've also spent my work years investigating different models for achieving social change through media. Media producers have vastly differing models of format and distribution, all of which are in flux as they cope with new media technologies. Having monitored these developments in the new media landscape, I've seen how new technologies push power into the hands of individuals, while new connectivity tools make it easier to reach a widespread audience, giving independent artists and activists a greater chance at finding viewers and funding.

At the same time, there has been a strong movement by private citizens trying to create social change outside traditional frameworks. A particularly visible expression of this has been the movement towards social entrepreneurship in which for profit companies are embracing socially responsible business models. The same sweeping trends have engulfed the world of media, where companies like Participant Productions are forging a new path for creative media for social change, while companies like Act Now Productions are bringing new media tools into social marketing campaigns.

I want to use creative media in combination with strategic communications principles to address issues of social importance, using an integrated approach that focuses on creative TV and film as a centerpiece in larger interactive public education campaigns. Film has the capacity to engage, transport, and inspire—all of which can make people more open to change. As an artist, I hope to make compelling content that draws on my understanding of public policy to apply it to the real world and bring a new audience into the policy dialogue.