



Media Literacy: Studying Media Representations

Theories related to collecting and
critiquing examples of
representations



Representation as Re-present

- Media do not simply reflect/mirror “reality”
- Media create or re-present a new reality
 - DisneyWorld as an artificial reality
 - “Reality” shows as a television “reality” drama
- Media “mediate” how we construct our lives
 - Adolescent females in “Merchants of Cool” who are preparing to be “supermodels”
 - Fashion magazine models mediate how they define their identities



Media Lab Approach

- Classroom as a media lab
- Studying media texts as “specimens”
- Sharing texts--VRC/DVD clips/web sites/magazines/newspapers/CD's/advertisements
 - important to not lose the larger cultural context
- Studying multiple, competing reactions
- Describing positioning: “What does this text want you to be or think?”
- Combine analysis and production of texts

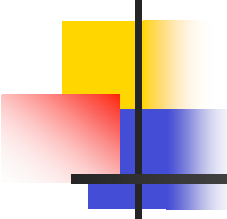


Traditional Notions of

Representation (Stuart Hall:

- Concept of “misrepresentation” assumes that there is a “true” or “fixed” meaning
<http://mediaed.sitepassport.net/videos/RaceDiversityAndRepresentation/RepresentationandtheMedia>
- <http://public.csusm.edu/public/brigham/Representationandmedia.html>
- Problem: meanings are constructed versus “true” or fixed”
- New meaning: representations as constitutive of events: the meaning depends on who controls the means of representation

[http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/
Modules/TF33320/represent.h
tml](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Modules/TF33320/represent.html)



- **Signifiers--images/actions/objects (jeans)**
- **Signified--implied meaning of signifiers (casualness/formality/dress for success)**
- **Codes--links between signifiers/signified**
- **Denotations--shared, agreed-on meaning**
- **Connotations--broader, ideological meanings related to a culture**



The Meaning of Images as Culturally Constituted

- The meaning of traffic lights (Hall)
 - The signified meanings of red and green is culturally determined
 - The difference between red and green is what signifies the meaning
 - All signs are arbitrary depending on the codes
 - The codes, not the color, fix the meaning
 - Meaning depend on the relation between a sign and a concept determined by a code



Images and Intertextuality

- Meaning of images/language in texts depends on knowledge of previous texts
 - Energizer Bunny based on prior ads
 - Uses of celebrity endorsements requires knowledge of these celebrities
- The meaning of intertextual links are constructed by viewers based on their media knowledge
 - Viewers enjoy fact that they are “in the know” about the intertextual references being made



Stereotypical Representations

- Gender: males/females
- People of color
- Workplace (largely upper-middle class)
- Adolescents
- Teachers
- Rural/urban settings
- Families



Stereotyping: Fixes/limits Meaning (Hall)

- Stereotypes limits meanings assigned to groups
 - Shapes perceptions of that group
 - Leaves out/over-generalizes meaning
 - “Scientists as nerds”/ “Native Americans as alcoholics”
- Contesting stereotypes by increasing diversity of images that open up new possibilities of identity
 - “Where do images come from?”
 - “Who produces images?”
 - “How id meaning closed down in representation?”



Problem of Essentializing Groups

- Essentializing differences in terms of gender, class, and race reflects stereotypes
 - “Boys always do X/girls do Y”
 - “Working-class people are like X.”
- Essentializing fails to consider variations in identities, contexts, and cultures
 - It is based on biological/behaviorist perspectives, rather than cultural perspectives



Gender as Performance vs. Essentialist Categories

- Problem of essentializing “male” versus “females” as biological concepts
- Gender as a cultural construction manifested through performance
 - Madonna as conflicted parody of gender stereotypes
<http://www.theory.org.uk/madonna.htm>
- Social contexts as constituted by gender
 - Sports events as display of masculine performance
 - Afternoon talk shows as display of female agency

Construction of Femininity

**Social practices: nurturer/helper roles:
teaching, nursing, mother**

- **“Beauty industry”**: appearance, slimness, or attractiveness as central to identity

<http://www.bodyimagesite.com>

<http://www.edap.org/media1.html>

<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/hogan599.htm>

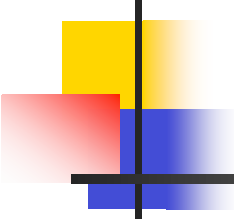
- **Identity constructed through heterosexual relationships** <http://io.newi.ac.uk/rdoover/med-stud/represen.htmv>

- **Romance novel: legitimacy of nurturer as transforming traditional male hero**



Women and Soap Opera

- Traditional soap opera as “female” (Gledhill)
 - Focus on relationships, family, personal matters, home, talk, community
 - Shots/music emphasize emotional reactions
- Endless storylines involves potential for disruption/further intrigue
- Female audience positioned to be engaged as part of being “in the home”
 - Overlap/repetition of segments combat fragmented/interrupted viewing experience



Sites for Studying Representations of Females

- <http://www.childrennow.org/media/mc97/ReflectSummary.html>
- <http://www.about-face.org>
- <http://www.genderequity.org/medialit/contents.htmlv>
- <http://www.genderequity.org/medialit/contents.html>
- <http://www.mergemag.org/>



Construction of Masculinity

- **1780-1850: middle-class social practices**
- **Separation of work and “home” as distinct gendered realms**
- **Men’s clubs/Christian community: moral commitment to service**
- **Austere dress vs. aristocratic dress**
- **Females: associated with home**



Representations: Masculinity

- Categories for fixed vs. varied identities
<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/departments/so/kibby.htm>
- Complex male role model often lacking in the media <http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-rol7.htm>
- Traditional masculinity: aggression, competition, domination as portrayed in men's magazines
<http://www.theory.org.uk/mensmags.htm>
<http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-rol5.htm>
- Cross-dressing films
http://www.apple.com/trailers/touchstone/sorority_boys.html



Representation of Class

- People's desire to be perceived as “middle class” by adopting class markers of dress, language, social practices
<http://www.pbs.org/peoplelikeus/>
- Representations of “working-class”
 - Roseanne
http://members.aol.com/_ht_a/marknute/Season1/rospics1.html
 - “White trash”
<http://www.whitetrashworld.com>



Representations of Race

- Power of white hegemony in film/media
 - Gramsci's theory of hegemony
<http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-rol6.htm>
 - Predominating control/portrayal of whites
 - People of color not shown as subservient and not engaging in "human"/complex practices
<http://afrikan.net/hype/>
<http://www.utexas.edu/world/latinosandmedia/index.html>
 - Blaxploitation films perpetuated stereotypes
 - Blacks still portrayed as criminals/ "sex slaves" as deviating from a white moral code system



Representations of “the Other”

- Representations of the Other reflect the operations of power
- Said, “Orientalism”: representations of the Orient from a European perspective
 - Orient as backward, mysterious, deviant
 - Presupposes European superiority
- Media representations of gays as “different”
 - <http://www.commercialcloset.org>



Representation and age

- Representations of elderly as out-of-touch and dependent
 - Example: Grandpa on The Simpsons
http://thesimpsons.com/bios/bios_family_grandpa.html
- Representations of adolescents as self-indulgent and irresponsible
 - Example: the “Goonies”
<http://us.imdb.com/Trailers?0089218&380&28>



Representation of urban vs. suburban worlds

- Representations of urban worlds as dangerous, crime-ridden, poor
<http://www.newmediastudies.com/art/city-med.htm>
- Representations of suburbia as bucolic, safe escape from urban world
- Or, representation of suburbia as shallow, conformist, uniform “cookie cutter” world



Representation and Consumerism

- <http://mediaed.sitepassport.net/videos/CommercialismGlobalizationAndMedia/AdvertisingEndOfWorld>
- Young children are socialized to become consumers at an early age
<http://www.med.sc.edu:1081/toys.htm>
http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson158.shtml
- Portrayal of consumers/TV viewers as modeling modes of consumption



Consumerism and Game Shows

- Portrayal of products as valued “prizes”
- Models/sexuality linked to prizes
- *Wheel of Fortune* as “life”
 - Life as represented as a “game” involving “luck”/ “skill” leading to “fortune”
 - Life as having “winners” and “losers”



Critical analysis techniques

- Select a certain topic or phenomenon
- Find different representations of this topic/phenomenon in magazines, TV, newspapers, literature, Web sites
- Note patterns in these representations
 - Note similarities in portrayals/images
 - Identify instances of stereotyping or essentializing