

- B. What does the oppositional interpretation reveal about the dynamics between the dominant ideology and subcultures?
- V. Rhetorical techniques: Are any of the following rhetorical devices used to position ideas in ways that reinforce the dominant ideology of the culture?
- Euphemisms
 - Labels
 - Metaphors
 - Obfuscation
 - Spin
 - Redirection
- VI. Narrative analysis: Does analysis of the narrative structure uncover the ideology of the media presentation? Examine the following:
- Illogical premise
 - Illogical conclusion
 - Characterization
- VII. Genre analysis: Examine a genre. What is its shared ideological orientation?
- VIII. Production elements: What do the following production elements disclose about the ideological subtext in the media production?
- Color
 - Lighting
 - Relative position
 - Scale
 - Movement
 - Angle
 - Music
 - Images
 - Juxtaposition of images
 - Imagistic layering
 - Transmutation of symbols
 - Masking images
 - Sequence of Images

2

Autobiographical Analysis

Overview

Autobiographical analysis is an approach that investigates media content as a way to promote personal discovery and growth. This framework provides opportunities for individuals to examine the impact of the media on their attitudes, values, lifestyles, and personal decisions. The autobiographical approach is *audience driven*; that is, the individual uses his or her own experience with the media as a springboard for analysis. This approach emphasizes process and exploration—ways of looking at media content—rather than set answers. At the same time, analyzing media presentations within the context of one's own personal experiences can furnish insight into the text, including characterization, plot conventions, worldview, and messages regarding success and violence.

The autobiographical approach broadens the scope of media literacy education. Because discussion and analysis begin with personal response to media content, autobiographical analysis is an excellent way to approach media literacy in the classroom. In addition, this approach can be particularly effective in nonacademic settings such as community groups, older adults, church organizations, and at-risk children. For instance, while people in retirement centers may not have the capability or inclination to apply themselves to the academic rigor of media literacy analysis, the autobiographical approach becomes educational in a broader sense—that is, providing a way to promote personal reflection and understanding. The autobiographical approach also offers an accessible way for parents to generate discussion with their children.

The autobiographical approach can also help bridge the disconnect between generations. Parents and teachers can use media to understand the language, culture, preoccupations, and concerns of younger genera-

tions. Moreover, this approach can bridge the gap between ethnic and racial groups, as well as other cultural schisms, such as rural/urban, rich/poor, and educated/uneducated.

Audience Interpretation of Media Content

Understanding the role of the audience in the interpretation of media content is critical to autobiographical analysis. Two schools of thought exist with respect to the role of the audience. According to the *hegemonic model*, the audience's interpretation of text generally is aligned with the values and beliefs of the dominant culture. Although a mass media text may be open to several interpretations, the text dictates a "preferred reading," from the perspective of the media communicator. Within this construct, the audience assumes a passive role in the communications process. (For further discussion on the hegemonic model, see Chapter 1, "Ideological Analysis.")

The autobiographical approach is based on the *reception theory*, which maintains that individuals assume an active role in interpreting the information they receive through mass media. The Ontario Ministry of Education states that audience members *negotiate* their own meaning as they encounter media messages:

Basic to an understanding of media is an awareness of how we interact with media texts. When we look at any media text, each of us finds meaning through a wide variety of factors: personal needs and anxieties, the pleasures or troubles of the day, racial and sexual attitudes, family and cultural background. All of these have a bearing on how we process information. For example, the way in which two students respond to a telephone situation comedy (sitcom) depends on what each brings to that text. In short, each of us finds or "negotiates" meaning in different ways. Media teachers, therefore, have to be open to the ways in which students have individually experienced the text with which they are dealing.¹

Consequently, audiences may negotiate a meaning that is entirely different from the "preferred" reading dictated by the media communicator. Individuals may use one of several processes to assimilate the information they receive through the media.

- *Selective exposure* is a process in which individuals choose what to watch and listen to, based on their personal values and interests.

If a person has an aversion to horror movies, he or she will avoid these types of programs.

- *Selective perception* occurs when a person's interpretation of content is colored by his or her predispositions and opinions. We hear what we want to hear and see what we want to see. For example, audiences at political debates tend to think that their candidate "won" the debate.
- *Selective retention* occurs when individuals remember (or forget) information, based on their interest level and attitudes toward the topic. For instance, we have all been cornered by a person who insists on talking at us about a subject we know (or care) little about. In these situations, we tend to tune the person out, waiting for an appropriate moment to escape to a more rewarding conversation.

A number of factors can influence how an individual responds to media programming.

Stage of Development

In general, younger children are more attuned to external characteristics (e.g., strength, beauty) than older children, who are more likely to use internal descriptors, such as motivational and personality characteristics.² A person's stage of development can also affect his or her particular frame of reference. In one study, adults who were asked to interpret the title of Olivia Newton-John's popular single "Let's Get Physical" said that the song was about sex. In contrast, teenagers thought that the song was about exercise.³

Psychological Disposition of the Individual

Some studies suggest that aggressive children may be attracted to media violence, which causes them to be even more aggressive.⁴ Other personality variables that influence response to violent programming include:

- Introversion or extroversion
- Stability or instability
- Tenderness or tough-mindedness⁵

Social Context

The social context of a media presentation can have a significant bearing on how individuals respond to the content. For instance, watching a comedy in an empty movie theater is an entirely different experience from seeing the film in a filled house, with everyone laughing.

Media scholar David Buckingham has found that children often engage in “social performance” in group settings—expressive or dramatic displays such as crying or hugging in response to (or for the benefit of) others in the group.⁶ However, in some cases, social context can actually *inhibit* behavior. For example, boys may feel uncomfortable crying in front of others during poignant points of a film.

At other times, the social context of a media presentation can be distracting. Is someone sitting directly in front of you in the movie theater, blocking your view? Are kids running up and down the aisles? Can you hear the dialogue in the film? These distractions can affect the way you react to the media presentation.

Content Attributes

Content attributes of a media presentation can affect behaviors and attitudes. A program with a solid script, fine performances, and skillful direction can elicit particular reactions in the audience. Conversely, a program that lacks these qualities can evoke an unintended response—laughter instead of fear—or, worse yet, no response whatsoever.

Another content attribute is the *verisimilitude* of the program—how “real” the program appears to be. Barry Gunter found that children are more disturbed by realistic depictions of violence, such as news broadcasts, as opposed to similar acts in fictional entertainment genres, such as westerns, science fiction, or cartoons.⁷

An individual may also be affected when the situation depicted in a program is reminiscent of an occurrence in the life of the audience member. This *psychological proximity* can also arise when a character resembles someone with whom the audience member has been involved. An anecdote by one of the authors may illustrate this point. In the early days of television, Jimmy Durante hosted a weekly variety program. Each episode featured the same conclusion: “The set darkened, except for a series of spotlights on the floor. Durante would walk away from the camera; as he moved from one spotlight to the next, the circle of light he had occupied

faded. Durante then would turn to the camera and wave, calling, ‘Good night, Mrs. Calabash (his pet name for his departed wife)—wherever you are.’” At the end of each show, the author (then a small child) would burst into tears, hysterical. The little boy’s bewildered parents would explain that Jimmy would return the next week—but to no avail.

Unbeknownst to his parents, this rather innocuous program segment had assumed a personal significance for the youngster. At that time, the author’s grandfather (an elderly man who resembled Durante) had suffered a debilitating stroke. Durante’s finale served as an enactment of death for the boy, triggering feelings of fear and grief. Thus, regardless of the intentions of the media communicator, a presentation may strike a responsive chord within the audience member.

Gender

Gender can also be a factor in the negotiation of meaning. For example, communication professor Byron Reeves found that children tend to respond most favorably toward same-sex characters.⁸ Further, because of expectations and conditioning, boys in Western culture are attracted to characters high in activity and strength dimensions, while girls are drawn to attractive characters.⁹ These gender-inspired responses may also serve as an indication of the relative positions of men and women in society. For example, many women respond intensely to a horror film depicting the victimization of females, whereas males are not as sensitive to this particular depiction of violence in media presentations.

Ethnic, Racial, and Class Identity

Members of different subcultures (e.g., racial or ethnic groups, social classes) have distinct, identifiable interests and, consequently, look for specific objectives or gratifications in media programming. When media content is generally congruent with the real-life experience of the audience, the result is a marked amplification in the response to the media presentation. Richard Frost and John Stauffer found that a sample of inner-city subjects responded more intensely to violent programming than a sample of college students. These researchers concluded that since the environment of the inner-city residents is indeed more violent than that of the college students, the formers’ significantly higher arousal levels to violent stimuli may be connected to their real-life surroundings.¹⁰

Affective Response Analysis

This line of inquiry asks audience members to focus on their emotional responses to a media presentation as a springboard to critical analysis. Visual and aural media are particularly well suited to emotional appeals. Unlike print, which is processed at a cognitive level, photography, film, television, and radio are directed at the heart; we first react emotionally, and then translate these feelings into words. One of the primary reasons for attending movies is to provide the audience with an intense emotional experience; indeed, the “feel-good” movie has emerged as a new genre. Because the response to visual and aural media content is largely emotional, discourse about media content is often reduced to a “Beavis and Butthead” sensibility: Either a program is “cool” or it “sucks.” Although this type of response initially discourages conversation, affective response offers an excellent springboard for systematic investigation of media content, beginning with *why* a program engenders a particular response in an individual.

Affective Response and Personal Belief Systems

Affective response analysis furnishes a framework for the systematic exploration of personal belief systems and can serve as the basis for critical self-analysis. Media programs give us an opportunity to “try out” emotions in a safe environment. There is little risk involved, since the media experience is private, and the individual’s emotional involvement is limited to the duration of the program. This emotional outlet is particularly healthy in cultures in which many people—particularly men—are removed from their emotions.

Indeed, different genres put audience members in touch with a range of primal feelings.

- The horror genre targets our most basic fears.
- Melodramas touch feelings of sadness, pathos, and regret.
- Comedies make us laugh.
- Action films tap into feelings of rage.
- Romances evoke feelings of passion, longing, and regret.

Affective response analysis can be especially instructive for children, by putting them in touch with their feelings. David Buckingham observes,

“Children are also ‘learning how to feel’—they are discovering what counts as an acceptable or appropriate emotional response, and the ways in which such responses serve to define them as individuals, both for themselves and for others.”¹¹

For example, Disney films are distinctive in their ability to introduce their young audiences to an array of emotional experiences. For instance, during the course of watching *The Lion King* (1994), children *grieve* for the loss of Simba’s father, are *outraged* by Simba’s subsequent humiliation and exile, and *rejoice* at Simba’s newly found resolve to reclaim his throne.

Moreover, affective responses to media programs can contribute to the formation of self-concept. Buckingham cites the example of Jenny, a fifteen-year-old girl who describes herself in terms of her responses to media programs—she is the type of person who would “cry at anything.”¹² People learn to react to media programs in ways that correspond to culturally acceptable gender roles: women cry; men rage. Moreover, individuals’ affective responses to media programs often change as they move into new stages of life. Young people who wish to “act like adults” learn to tone down their responses to media programs.

Asking individuals to talk about how they feel during particular parts of a narrative can provide insight into the audience member’s personal belief system. Examining affective responses to media presentations can also furnish insight into the *origin* and *source* of a person’s emotional reactions. Buckingham explains, “The things that make us cry in films also make us cry in real life.”¹³ Buckingham has found that children tend to identify themes in media programs that resonate in their everyday lives, such as disruption of the family, the impossible romance, pity toward those who are presumed to be vulnerable or innocent (e.g., animals), or body violation.¹⁴

Follow-up questions can then focus on whether the emotional responses they experience while watching a program carry over into their everyday interactions, and what these responses may indicate about their personal belief systems.

An extension of this approach is the *pleasure perspective*, which is based on the assumption that media programs are often the source of genuine enjoyment. It can be revealing, therefore, to discover what kinds of activities depicted in a media presentation generate a pleasurable response from audience members. Particular elements of a program such as sex, violence, or romantic tension may evoke consistent reactions

from an audience member; these same elements trigger a pleasurable response when they appear in other programs as well. The appearance of particular actors may serve as the source of continual pleasure. Particular programs or genres (e.g., musicals or romantic comedies) may elicit a positive response. Consequently, examining pleasurable responses to media programming can serve as a starting point for self-analysis, by examining what these responses reveal about the individual's interests, attitudes, and values.

Programs may also elicit pleasurable *secondary* emotions; for example, being frightened in a horror film can be followed by a sensation of excitement. It can be useful, then, to backtrack, focusing attention on the initial reaction that leads to the secondary response.

However, it should be noted that when using this mode of analysis in a group setting, facilitators are faced with the challenge of encouraging students to be open and honest in their responses, while maintaining a mutually respectful classroom environment. Because the mode of analysis is rooted in personal experience, a student's responses may diverge with others in the class, especially the teacher's. Len Masterman explains, "Some people may be disturbed, worried or offended by the very things in a text which others find pleasurable."¹⁵ A pleasurable response can be tied to "dubious or oppressive purposes," such as violence or acts of racism.¹⁶

Coping Strategies

The study of affective response can furnish perspective into the *coping strategies* that individuals commonly use to deal with emotional distress. From birth, people learn to develop strategies to distance themselves from sources of emotional trauma. Once established, these coping strategies become a habitual response that helps individuals keep their feelings under control.

The media have emerged as a principal arena in which people learn coping mechanisms. Buckingham has identified the following coping strategies that children use in response to disturbing media content:

- *Denial.* Some children disown their emotions by refusing to acknowledge their feelings, either to themselves or to others. For instance, they may be scared by a scary movie but wouldn't admit it.¹⁷

- *Challenge.* This coping mechanism establishes the media experience as a personal challenge: "I *should* be able to watch." In this case, the audience member's ability to persevere through this uncomfortable experience is looked upon as a rite of passage that moves the person to the next stage of personal development, toward adulthood.
- *Mockery.* Some audience members maintain a safe distance from the media experience by installing an emotional filter—mockery or irony—between themselves and their feelings. For instance, during a horror movie, some members of the audience may laugh, electing to see the program as comical. By making fun of the presentation, they are able to regain control of the situation. *Overreaction* is a related coping strategy, in which audience members turn their emotions into a safe burlesque by exaggerating their responses. For instance, at a horror movie audience members may scream or try to scare one another during tense points in a narrative.
- *Comfort devices.* In response to disturbing content, some individuals seek physical comfort in the form of pillows, toys, or people to hug.
- *Partial or total avoidance.* Some people simply avoid material that they feel incapable of dealing with by hiding their faces at pivotal moments or leaving the screening area.
- *Reality checking.* Others cope by consciously reminding themselves that the media presentation isn't real. For instance, fearful viewers may force themselves to think of a horror film as "only a movie." Another reality check is to look for flaws in the program, (e.g., artistic mistakes, poor acting performances, or logical inconsistencies in the plot).
- *Distraction.* Audience members who are uncomfortable may try to distract themselves by thinking of "happy thoughts" or aspects of their everyday lives (e.g., errands they have to run after the film) as a way to regain control and perspective.
- *Repetition.* Some audience members respond to disturbing content by seeing the program repeatedly. By becoming familiar with the material, audience members regain the control they relinquished on the first viewing. Because they are no longer surprised or shocked by the content, they become immune to the effects of the content.
- *Alibi.* Some children in Buckingham's study dealt with the embarrassment caused by their responses by attributing their reactions to other factors. Some excuses were physical (e.g., "something in

my eye”), while others manufactured alternate reasons for their response (e.g., “My sister left town.”)

- *Changing the context.* Watching at another time, with other people, can help people put a troubling media experience into perspective.

Understanding the ways that audience members cope with emotional tensions generated by the media can furnish perspective into the coping mechanisms they use elsewhere in their lives. After identifying an individual’s coping strategies, it is then possible to focus on the *source* of these defensive mechanisms. And, if appropriate, this self-knowledge provides the individual with an opportunity to change these coping behaviors.

Affective Analysis: Function

Examining the *function*, or purpose, of affective response asks audience members to think along with the media communicator:

- What objective is served when the media communicator elicits a particular reaction from the audience?
- How does the media communicator want you to be feeling at particular points in the plot? Sad? Happy? Scared? Insecure? Envious?
- *Why* does the media communicator attempt to elicit that intended emotional response from the audience.

Media artists often strive to spark an emotional reaction from the audience for dramatic purposes. “*Show*, don’t *tell*” is an adage that can be applied to media presentations. Rather than simply talking about a subject, it is always more effective to evoke the same emotions from the audience that the characters in the presentation are experiencing. The effective media communicator is able to anticipate how the audience should react at each point of the presentation and then strives to elicit that particular response. For instance, Hollywood director George Cukor was not known for his technical expertise. Instead, he surrounded himself with the best available cast and crew and, stationing himself by the camera, acted as his *own* audience while the action unfolded. If Cukor was moved by the scene, he was satisfied. If not, he would gather his experts around him to discuss strategies that would produce the intended response.

Advertisers manipulate the emotions of their audience to persuade

them to buy their products. Ads often are directed at one of a number of *intrinsic psychological motivations*, including: guilt, love, need for approval, nostalgia, and fixation with death (including need for control, promises of immortality, fears of failure and of the unknown). For instance, in a television commercial for Tide detergent, a woman confesses her shame about her own experience as the youngest of several sisters who had to endure the embarrassment of wearing discolored hand-me-downs. As a mother of several girls, she is determined to spare her youngest daughter from this trauma. Thus, Tide has been transformed into a product that cleanses not only laundry but one’s stained emotional past as well.

In contrast, advertisements that display animals or babies evoke a warm response, which the media communicator hopes the audience will transfer to the product. Advertisers may also use humor, snappy music, or celebrities to make viewing commercials enjoyable and memorable.

Affective response can serve an *ideological* function as well. Cultural studies scholar Douglas Kellner declares that a positive reaction to content is often associated with power and knowledge:

We often are conditioned about what to enjoy and what we should avoid. We learn when to laugh and when to cheer (and laugh tracks on TV sitcoms and entertainment cue us in case we don’t get it ourselves). A system of power and privilege thus conditions our pleasures so that we seek certain socially sanctioned pleasures and avoid others. Some people learn to laugh at racist jokes and other learn to feel pleasure at the brutal use of violence. . . . Pleasures are often, therefore, a conditioned response to certain stimuli and should thus be problematized, along with other forms of experience and behavior, and interrogated as to whether they contribute to the production of a better life and society, or help trap us into modes of everyday life that ultimately oppress and degrade us.¹⁸

Thus, media communicators maneuver the audience into emotional reactions that reinforce the prevailing ideology of the program. For instance, when violent action is accompanied by a laugh track or silly music, the violence is discounted as a humorous activity and the audience tends to discount the violence. Further, media educator Len Masterman contends that making media messages pleasurable is an effective way to “sell” objectionable ideas: “A narrative seeks to enlist our sympathies for a cause, a character or an idea that we might repudiate given the time for more mature reflection.”¹⁹ (For further discussion of ideology, see Chapter 1.)

Identification Analysis

Identification analysis is an approach in which individuals contrast media presentations with their own personal experience. Viewing a media presentation affords individuals the opportunity to project their personal experience onto the characters, enabling them to view their situations from a safe distance. Analyzing the characters in a media presentation can serve as a springboard to an examination of an individual's own life and social environment. Linguist Kenneth Burke suggests that literature (and by extension media presentations) can be understood as "equipment for living": "[Within narratives] are strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing loses, for warding off the evil eye, for purification, propitiation and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition, and exhortation, implicit commands for instructions of one sort or another. Art forms like 'tragedy' or 'comedy' or 'satire' . . . size up situations in various ways in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes."²⁰ In addition, media presentations can introduce clients to ideas they may not be ready or willing to hear directly. Therapists John and Jan Hesley strategically assign the viewing of certain films they feel will be beneficial to the therapeutic process of their clients. In addition, the narratives provide both the therapists and clients with metaphors for reflection and discussion.²¹

In her essay "Premature Burial," writer Jane Anne Phillips vividly recounts the mirroring between the B-grade horror films of Roger Corman and her own life growing up in a coal town in West Virginia. Corman's gothic sets and frequent gothic burials, she says, "were haunting, inverted metaphors of things that were true, things too frightening to think about as a child. . . ." What about my own life, how shaky things seem. . . . "What does it mean buried? The frequent, gothic burials in Corman's films are relatively speedy events; here in our town, there's daily life—along slow process."²²

Identification analysis can serve as a particularly effective counseling tool with young people who have difficulty talking about themselves. Identification fulfills a critical role in the formation of self-concept. Psychologist Gloria Johnson Powell explains that children discover personality traits in themselves by recognizing them in others: "After the early differentiation of self from the animate and inanimate worlds, the process of self-concept development becomes more social in nature. It begins to involve identification with others, introjection from

others, and expansion into interpersonal relationships."²³ Thus, talking about the characters in a media presentation and discussing questions about the narrative can help to bridge this "disconnect" and disclose information about their own values, attitudes, behaviors, preoccupations, and concerns.

Character Identification

Character identification can furnish perspective into individuals' interests, aspirations, and values. Audience members' identification with particular characters can be a valuable source of information about what people consider attractive or engaging behaviors, values, or attributes.

Audience members frequently identify with media figures and the worlds they inhabit, measuring their own lives in relation to what is happening to their favorite characters on-screen. For example, after Jerry Seinfeld decided to discontinue his hit sitcom, fans made a pilgrimage to Tom's Restaurant, the site of the exterior shots used for the coffee-shop scenes in the program (although all of the interior scenes were shot in a studio in Los Angeles). "Where else could we go?" asked Denise Jones, a secretary from Queens who made the sojourn with two friends to have a tuna sandwich (one of the staples of the show's characters).

For Donna Stephen, a visitor from Houston, the version of New York City portrayed in *Seinfeld* served as her tour guide during her trip to the city: "Everything we know about New York City is from *Seinfeld*. Like how to bootleg a movie, how to smuggle cafe latte into the movies in your pants, how to fight for a parking space, how to follow the protocol at the Soup Nazi."²⁴

Fans were in mourning, seeing the end of the series as a form of death for the characters, who had become very real to them. Teri Goldberg remarked, "I wish I was friends with Elaine . . . I love her. She's so funny. I feel like I use her expressions all the time." Lynly Stephen, a speech therapist from Dallas, said she would miss Kramer, also known by his elusive first name Cosmo: "What a bad way to wake up, and me even here in New York. I just worry, what will happen to Cosmo."²⁵

The character-identification process operates in one of the following ways:

- Audience members identify with characters they feel are similar to them.

Seinfeld



Character identification can furnish perspective into individuals' interests, aspirations, and values. To illustrate, many fans of *Seinfeld* measured their own lives in relation to what happened to their favorite characters of the popular sitcom. (*Getty Images; photographer: Bob Riha, Jr.*)

- Audience member identify with those they aspire to be like.
- Audience members adopt the point of view of the person with whom they identify.
- Audience members react to what is happening to the character as if it was happening to them.
- Audience members identify with the situation in which the characters find themselves.
- Audience members emulate behaviors exhibited by the characters with whom they identify.

Some critics have expressed concern that identification with media personalities can lead directly to imitative behavior. However, it should be noted that modeling behavior can be a positive, instructive stage of personality formation. Moreover, although identification is a *precondition* of imitation, it is not a *guarantee* that people will adopt the modeling behavior.

Identification is a widespread and normal part of the formation of identity, and people have always looked to external sources (e.g., parents, actors, actresses, sports figures) as role models. This process enables individuals to “try on” aspects of personality that they admire in a media figure. Children sometimes engage in *fantasy participation*, in which they insert themselves into the program. Fantasy participation can help children prepare for the world off screen, as they picture what they would do in those circumstances to alter the situation.²⁶

In like fashion, identifying with a media figure can serve as a public declaration of self. For instance, a young man who wears a T-shirt with the likeness of Bono on it is displaying his taste in music. Moreover, wearing the shirt is making a statement about his lifestyle, attitudes, and positions on political and social issues.

Character identification can be a valuable source of information about what people consider attractive or engaging behaviors, values, or attributes. In that sense, examining an individual's responses to characters in a media presentation can provide insight into his or her belief system. This mode of analysis includes the following steps:

- Identify favorite characters and explain what you liked and disliked about them.
- Clarify the nature of the character identification: *likeness* (in which the individual sees a resemblance with the character) or *aspiration* (in which the individual would like to emulate the character). This strategy can provide insight into the individual's perceived gender, ethnic, racial, and class identification, as well as information about what the individual considers attractive or engaging behaviors, values, and attributes.
- Name additional attributes that the individual did *not* include in his or her original list of character traits. This may lead to discussion about qualities that may not be readily apparent but are nevertheless essential to the overall positive portrait of the character. This also can serve as a useful springboard for discussion about cultural values, in cases where individuals identify with “negative” attributes (such as violent tendencies) depicted in the media presentation.
- Discuss the role that the attributes of the character play in the successful outcome of the story. For example, a violent temperament often is key to resolving problems in media programs. At the same time, other attributes may help the individual succeed within the

context of the narrative—some of which, perhaps, the audience member does not identify with or immediately think about. From this point, individuals can examine the role that these attributes play in the outcome of their own life “narratives.” Does being tough or violent guarantee success?

- Discuss whether there are *missing* attributes in some characters that prevent them from succeeding within the context of the narrative.
- Name characters to whom individuals *cannot* relate. This can stimulate discussion about expectations: what can be regarded as unrealistic or “too perfect” characters, or characters with attributes that the individual may regard as unobtainable in his or her own life.
- Oppositional identification is a particularly useful approach, in which individuals identify with a character other than the protagonist: a member of a subculture, a member of the opposite sex, or a supporting character (see discussion of this technique in Chapter 1, “Ideological Analysis”). The analysis could, then, pursue the following line of questioning:

- What could you accomplish as one of *these* characters?
- What opportunities would be available to you?
- What advantages would you have?
- What could you “get away with” because of your position?
- What conclusions can you draw from this analysis?

• Discuss how the individual relates to villains in the media presentation. This tactic often reveals that individuals are attracted to some of the character traits of the antagonists and find the heroes to be less appealing. One way to account for this phenomenon is that audience members identify with some of the flaws of the antagonists. Moreover, there could be appealing aspects to the villainous character—in that sense, characterization (and human nature) is more complex than the absolute distinctions presented in the media. In fact, villainous characters may display an energy, creativity, and sexuality that can be seen as attractive.

Unfortunately, media portrayals of minority groups offer limited opportunities for character identification. Aimee Dorr observes, “If minority children look for models of the same ethnicity as themselves, they find few to choose from on television. Those they do find have a limited range

of personality characteristics, occupations, and social circumstances to emulate. If, on the other hand, they look for role models who are powerful and successful, then they would probably emulate white characters.”²⁷ Dorr observes that the cumulative media messages about social class suggest that in order to become successful, one must relinquish one’s identification with these subcultures. “If [minority children] look to minority characters as role models, then they might learn to be less knowledgeable, wealthy, assertive, or dominant than would white children, to defer to whites, or to accept largely white versions of their minority culture. If they look to white characters as role models, then they might learn white values and behaviors vis-à-vis work, money, aggression, competition, cooperation, family life, and so on. All of which may require giving up some distinctive elements of one’s own ethnic culture.”²⁸

Character identification can also provide insight into the *ideology* of a narrative. The media text encourages the audience member to identify with the primary protagonists, who are the sources of power in the presentation and aligned with its prevalent ideology (for further discussion, see Chapter 1, “Ideological Analysis”). By imagining themselves in the role of the primary figure in the program, individuals gain insight into the sources of power and assumptions about what constitutes “the good life,” within the context of the media presentation. Questions to consider include:

- As the lead character, what could *you* accomplish?
- What opportunities would be available to you?
- What advantages would you have? What could you “get away with”?

Another useful line of inquiry involves examining an individual’s initial emotional response to characters “making an entrance.” The first impression an actor makes sets the emotional tone for the entire program and establishes a relationship between the character and the audience. Consequently, it can be beneficial to ask audience members to describe their affective (emotional) responses at that moment and what generated their initial impression. For example, the selection of clothing can elicit a reaction, including admiration or sexual attraction. Or the character may be involved in an activity or engaged in dialogue that moves the audience. Often the character displays an intense emotion that shocks or impresses the audience.

The next area of exploration is whether the audience maintains or changes this initial impression, and what (if anything) causes this change. Finally, based on their subsequent behavior in the story, do the characters deserve that particular initial response from the audience?

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is a line of inquiry in which a story serves as a springboard for personal reflection and discussion. Two approaches involving narrative analysis are particularly useful: narrative reconstruction and narrative forecasting.

Narrative Reconstruction

Narrative reconstruction refers to a process in which individuals recount a story they have seen, heard, or read in the media. Narrative reconstruction is rooted in the experience of the individual, providing insight into how individuals make sense of the programming they have watched, heard, or read. Thus, asking an individual to reconstruct the essential elements of a narrative can be an excellent way to learn about his or her interests and preoccupations.

The first step involves focusing on the *explicit content* of a media presentation. Explicit content refers to the essential events and activities in a story that are displayed through visible action. The audience constructs meaning by selecting the essential pieces of explicit information in the story that answer the question, "What was the program about?" For example, consider the following scenario: A man bops another fellow over the head with a brickbat, takes his money, and flees. Later in the program he is caught and carted off to jail. The audience constructs meaning by selecting the essential pieces of explicit information in the story. In this example, five distinct actions are described: (1) the clubbing; (2) the theft; (3) the flight; (4) the apprehension; and (5) the incarceration.

In his study of children's comprehension of television content, psychology professor W. Andrew Collins found that children typically have difficulty remembering explicit details and identifying important scenes:

- Eighth graders recalled 92 percent of the scenes that adults had judged as essential to the plot.

- Fifth graders recalled 84 percent of the scenes that adults had judged as essential to the plot.
- Second graders recalled an average of only 66 percent of the scenes that adults had judged as essential to the plot.²⁹

According to Collins, young children's limited grasp of explicit story material impairs their ability to interpret media content: "Young children fail to comprehend observed actions and events in an adult-like way because they arrive at different interpretations of the various actors' plans or intentions. . . . Thus, it is possible that second and third graders take away not only a less complete understanding of the program than fifth and eighth graders do, they may also be perceiving the content of the program somewhat *differently* because they retain (and work off of) a different set of cues."³⁰ In retelling stories, young children often have difficulty deciding on the essential points in the narrative. They may omit parts of the story that adults judge to be essential content and may include pieces of the story deemed nonessential.

Young children often embellish a story with their own experiences, sometimes inserting themselves into the narrative. In addition, they may include or emphasize what they regard as important and omit or de-emphasize what they see as unimportant. For example, in describing a James Bond movie, a young child may devote an extraordinary amount of attention describing the Austin Healy driven by the British agent, reflecting his or her interest in cars. In recounting a media narrative, individuals may also add their editorial commentary (e.g., "This was neat").

Reconstructing the narrative also provides insight into an individual's understanding of *implicit content*. Implicit content refers to those elements of a narrative that remain under the surface:

- Motives (why did the characters behave as they did?)
- The relationship between events
- The relationship between characters
- The consequences of earlier action

According to Collins, young children have even more difficulty identifying implicit than explicit content. In their narrative reconstruction of plots, second-grade boys operate on a "chance" level, meaning that they are developmentally incapable of recognizing the implicit elements

in a plot.³¹ Therefore, as part of narrative reconstruction, it is useful to ask the following:

- Why do you think that an event occurred?
- What is the relationship between events in the story?
- What is the relationship between characters in the story?
- Were the consequences of characters' actions made clear?

Narrative Forecasting

Narrative forecasting refers to a process in which individuals put themselves in the situation depicted in the media program and respond to the following questions:

- What is the significance of (or meaning behind) the events in the narrative?
- How would you feel about being in that situation?
- What do you think will happen next? Why?
- How will the characters be affected? Why?
- How would you react if it happened to you?
- Does the situation remind you of your own life?

For example, a team of educators, college students, and staff members used identification analysis with some success at the Hogan Street Regional Youth Center, a juvenile offender facility in the state of Missouri. Judy McMillan, a teacher at Hogan, described these adolescents, some of whom have committed serious crimes, as a strange anomaly: "None of the teenagers have been off of their block, but all of them have been to Hollywood."³² In this case, movies serve as a primary source of information about gender roles, as well as definitions and strategies for success.

The teaching team presented a series of film clips from *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) as a vehicle for discussion about behavior and personal choice. The first clip depicts a confrontation between two groups of African American teenagers: Verbal exchanges between the groups become heated, and challenges are issued. The narrative then cuts to a shot of Darin "Doughboy" Baker (Ice Cube), who reaches inside his coat pocket. At that point, the video was paused. The teenagers talked about what principles were at stake: In a world of diminished prospects

and expectations, conducting oneself with honor, personal dignity, and concern for reputation was magnified in importance.

The students were then asked to speculate about what was going to occur next in the narrative. All of the students agreed that Doughboy was reaching for a gun and was going to shoot members of the rival gang. The discussion then turned to "why" this was a "logical" next step in the narrative: The students explained that in a world of diminished expectations, this behavior was equated with conducting oneself with honor, personal dignity, and concern for reputation.

The teenagers were then asked to draw connections between the fictional narrative and their own lives. The members of the group generally agreed that the worldview depicted in the film was reminiscent of their own experience and that the values delineated in the narrative were an important part of their own lives as well.

A question was then raised that focused on *consequences*: What do you think will happen to Doughboy if, indeed, he does pull a gun and shoot a rival gang member? Significantly, the answer was universally, "Nothing bad will happen to him." As one student explained, no harm could possibly come to him because Doughboy was the star of the movie.

Once again, the discussion moved from discussion of the narrative to their *own* experiences: What do you think would happen if *you* had fired the gun? If you shot someone, would you get caught? What would the punishment be?

The subsequent discussion focused on the *consequences* of the code of conduct displayed in the film: Are there other options available that would have enabled the characters to retain their dignity and self-respect?

Then the team played the rest of the scene. Significantly, Doughboy fired his gun into the air.

De-identification

A related mode of analysis focuses attention on the *limits* of identification. Although film, television, and other media may appear to reflect the audience's experience, the media construct a reality that is impossible to emulate in real life. Production elements such as editing present selected moments that make the world depicted in the media appear exciting. The addition of a musical score makes even pedestrian acts like crossing the street appear dramatic. Special effects and stunt specialists enable characters to perform astonishing acts of strength and daring. And be-

cause the action is scripted, our heroes and heroines never miss a line, accidentally spill their food, or die in the middle of the story.

Moreover, through the use of makeup, editing, lighting, and digital manipulation, actors always look perfect. The members of the audience cannot possibly measure up to these idealized figures. Ironically, even the stars *themselves* cannot measure up to their own idealized standard of beauty. For example, actress Isabella Rossellini was asked about the secret of her unlined looks, captured on the cover of *Vogue* magazine when she was forty-five: “Well, you can’t go by the photo. Because obviously, the photo is an enhanced version of me, you know. It generally takes hours of makeup and fantastic lighting, a great photographer. So I don’t think I look as good in life as in my photos.”³³ Examining these production and performance elements can provide insight into how efforts to identify with media characters can create unrealistic expectations on the part of the audience.

Media Chronicles

The mass media have emerged as a pervasive influence in American culture. We continually receive information through the channels of mass communication whether we are at home, in the car, or in the supermarket. Through technological advances, media programming accompanies us everywhere. In the 1950s, thanks to the invention of the transistor, the radio became a constant companion—on the beach, on family vacations, and at parties. More recently, iPods and BlackBerryes provide us with universal access to music, information, and access to the Web.

Because of the repetitive nature of commercial media programming, the public is inundated with the same messages, delivered over a relatively brief time span. Radio stations play their most popular tunes once per hour. Reruns and spin-offs abound on television. Further, the advertising industry bombards the consumer with the same images and slogans in order to establish audience recognition and patronage. Indeed, much of the information that we receive is involuntary. Members of the family may have programs blaring in another room that we cannot avoid hearing.

Consequently, mass communications has assumed a very personal role in the lives of its audience. Watching old films, TV shows, or listening to radio programs can spark personal recollections of otherwise forgotten pieces of the past. Indeed, media programming often assumes a personal significance that transcends its aesthetic or entertainment value. Instead,

the media program has become internalized as a part of our personal experience, and we may feel nostalgic about a program because it has put us in touch with ourselves and our pasts. Hearing an old song on the radio may awaken memories of a summer long ago, perhaps, or of old friends, or a first romance. In that sense, it may not be the song that we are reacting to (in fact, we may dislike the particular tune).

In the 1970s, scholars began to conduct *oral histories*, in which they recorded the personal reminiscences of older citizens as a means of studying personal and cultural history. In like fashion, a media chronicle project consists of presenting clips of popular media programs from a particular era to the audience. The facilitator then records individuals’ personal recollections that have been stimulated by the program. For instance, playing the tune “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” to a group at a retirement center in St. Louis, Missouri, reminded one old gentleman of his youth, when he would skip school and take the streetcar to Sportsman’s Park to watch the Gas House Gang—the St. Louis Cardinals baseball club, featuring Dizzy Dean, Pepper Martin, and Frankie Frisch. He even recalled watching the St. Louis Browns playing the New York Yankees and seeing Babe Ruth hit a home run.

In addition to stimulating personal recollections, media chronicles furnish insight into historical events. For instance, many songs, films, and radio programs of the Depression era commented on this period of American history (e.g., the popular tune that began, “We ain’t got a barrel of money”). Presenting snippets of these programs may trigger personal memories about this historical period. Media can also be associated with social movements. For instance, the cult film *Easy Rider* (1969) assumes a significance for members of the sixties counterculture. Seeing this film many years later may evoke memories about the social and political experiences of this social group.

Media programs also kindle personal recollections about stages of life. For instance, people may embrace films, songs, and television programs that they associate with their adolescence. Media programs may also be associated with seasonal activities. For example, Christmas music and movies often evoke memories of family and past holiday seasons.

A freshman seminar at Webster University participated in a media chronicles exercise in which the students brought CDs to class and played songs that had personal significance for them. The students then were invited to share any of their personal recollections triggered by the song. The following is an edited transcript of their recollections:

Song: "Fight for Your Right," Beastie Boys
Angie Kilber:

It just completely reminds me of my entire four years in high school. Because it talked about, first of all, "I don't want to go to school. Mom, please don't make me go." But I had to go anyway, because she was one of those, really "into school" parents. And then the second verse is like smoking and you can't do that. And I started smoking when I was sixteen and my parents hated it and now they finally understand now that I'm a . . . It was just this big ordeal throughout high school that I could not smoke. It was just bad. And my dad was just being a hypocrite and it says that in the song too.

And it also reminds me of the summer after my senior year. Because finally, it was all over. This past summer I was like, "Wow, I love the song. Now I'm not in high school anymore. I don't have to do this anymore. I don't have to put up with it. My parents don't care that I smoke." And I was so happy. And I brought it to a friend of mine's house where we used to go all the time. He was one of my best friends. He had a really big party here. And we played this song. And everyone there screamed through the entire song really, really, really loud. And I will never forget it. Because we were all sitting in . . . thinking of this song.

Other students were then invited to discuss any of their own personal recollections that were evoked by "Fight for Your Right."

Plesah Mayo:

This reminds me of the beginning of my senior year. Because my dad was living in Colorado Springs. He'd got stationed there. It was just me and my mom alone here together. And she was driving me up the wall. . . . And she'd make me come home at 10 o'clock during the summer and stuff like that. Even on weekends. And I was getting really upset with this because all my friends stayed out late. I was sixteen but I was going into my senior year. And my friend Tracy used to take her brother's car all the time and it had a CD in there. And what happened is I start getting so sick of my mom, and I'd sneak out at night. And there were times when Tracy would come and pick me up at night and this song would be playing and I'd be like yeah, rebellion. But then it just kind of reminds me of all the stuff I did . . . in the school year. I did irritate my mom. I'd go to parties really late at night. . . . But now I really feel bad.

Shay Malone:

This song reminds me of my freshman year in high school. . . . We couldn't have our prom because the principal stole our money. So, I remember

all the ninth graders trying to figure out what they were going to do. And this guy stood up and he had on a cowboy hat and he just started singing this song. And the whole auditorium started singing this song. Because we wanted our prom.

Callie Pitt:

This is not one of those happy associations memories. Like a senior's last day or a bunch of people getting together listening to this. This was possibly one of the worst first-date songs. My best friend's boyfriend fixed me up with his brother. And I met his brother before. And we got along fine. But apparently, some rumors had reached his school about me that were not true. . . . He went over called his friend and said come get me there's somebody here I don't want to be around. This song was playing in the background. So every time I hear that I think Bryan was really a jerk.

Song: "Crash into Me," Dave Matthews Band
Bernard Cummings:

This song reminds me of the last show in high school. It was *The Boys Next Door*. I remember the entire cast being in the dressing room just listening to . . . It felt sad. . . . We said how much we love each other, how much we'll miss each other. . . . We started thinking about how the theater department would survive without us. And we were, "Oh, well, we have this guy here, this girl here, she can do it."

Gretchen Olson:

It was from this past summer. Right before I left for college, I had to make some money. So, I got a job at a video store in my hometown. And there was this guy who worked there who^a was my age but he'd gone to another high school. . . . And I got just this massive crush on him. . . . We'd close the store at night and he put Dave Matthews in the tape deck. So, while we were cleaning up the store, all the lights off in the store, and this song would be playing. And our boss would be like, "Hey, you guys want a beer?" And we all would sit up front, sit on the counter drinking our beer just listening to this song and, like, wow, these are the best days. And I'd go yeah, these are the best days . . . so much. And I always think about that when I hear that song.

Angie Kilber:

Mine isn't a sappy, happy memory at all. This song reminds me of the day I got fired. Cause it was playing when I left. . . . And I loved that job.

I'd been there for two years. And I knew everything about it. I trained people because I worked there for so long. Then one day they the district manager . . . told me that someone had said that I had stolen something. And it was really a big misunderstanding because I would have never stolen from the company or anything like that. And I was trying to tell them that and it just made them more mad because they felt I was lying to them. . . . It made me very angry. And listening to that song makes very angry. Because when I left the store there was that song on a stupid tape they play over and over again. And I had to leave. . . . Just hearing that song makes me very, very angry. As if you can't tell. . . . I didn't know I could get this angry just hearing a song. I didn't know that just hearing something could make me that emotional.

Song: "The Time Warp, from The Rocky Horror Picture Show"
Lisa Pavia:

I was involved in a youth group. Every year we have three hundred teenagers crowding in this theater for a skit night on Thursday night. And it's a very long night because we have a lot of kids . . . and they all do skits. The leaders are all together and they are all the same age. And they have as much time as they want. So, they did a medley of songs. And my very first year there, I'm like, who are these weird people? And they're dancing around to this song. It was very, very cramped. And a lot of people were sweating. And we just want to get out of here. But that [song] kind of took us away from that. And we were all, like, singing and having a good time. And we all got to jump onto the stage and do the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* at the end.

This set of media chronicles demonstrates why individuals have such a passionate attachment to popular music. Clearly, the songs triggered deeply emotional memories. As Angie recalled an unhappy memory associated with the song, she actually re-experienced the anger that she had felt at the time. She observed in amazement, "I didn't know that just hearing something could make me that emotional." Further, popular music put the students in touch with a range of emotions. Gretchen associated "Crash into Me" with romantic feelings, while Callie began, "This is not one of those happy associations memories."

Recalling popular media programming can bring past experiences into the present. Gretchen treasured "Crash into Me" because it froze a moment in time and space. ("We all would sit up front . . . just listening to this song and, like, wow, these are the best days.") Indeed, at one point in Lisa Pavian's recollection, she moves between past and present tense ("It was very, very cramped. And a lot of people were sweating. And we just want

to get out of here"). For Lisa, hearing the music triggered other senses as well, such as sight and smell, making the memory even more real.

Some students associated songs with significant moments in their lives. Shay's recollection focused on an incident in which "Fight for Your Right" emerged as an anthem for her high school class, expressing their indignation and sense of betrayal when her principal absconded with their prom funds. Some students linked popular songs to rites of passage commemorating significant personal changes, such as proms or graduation. A song may remind an individual of a broad time span ("en-tire four years of high school") or embody a general attitude toward the world. For Angie, the Beastie Boys song articulated her general distaste for her high school years. Song lyrics may articulate the precise feelings and experiences of the listener. (Angie declares, "And then the second verse is like smoking and you can't do that. And I started smoking when I was sixteen and my parents hated it.")

Popular music also helps to forge meaningful connections between people. Whether the students in the class hailed from Madison, Wisconsin, or Crestwood, Missouri, sharing the same musical interests served as a unifying experience for the members of the class. Taste in music also provided significant information about classmates, serving as an indication of other interests and personality traits. As Angie commented during the debriefing session, "I think that it's a good thing because [Shay] had kind of the same thing going on about [the Beastie Boys] song. Because that was my whole rebellion. I hated school so it was kind of the same for her. And just the fact that she liked it. I don't know, I get along good with people who like the same music I do, for some reason."

Media Production Analysis

Media technology provides tools that can help promote personal discovery and growth. The digital domain offers teenagers an opportunity to experiment with new ideas, ways to relate to others, and experience different sides of self. Psychologist Camille Sweeney explains:

Herein lies the thrill of the on-line self: its malleability, its plasticity, the fact that it can be made up entirely of your own imagination. You can take your old self, or don a fresh one, and hang out in a group of jocks for a post game chat, argue the banality of Britney Spears with an international posse of pop connoisseurs, post a note to a cool-sounding guy from

Detroit—all without ever having to leave your bedroom. Maybe this is the Internet's greatest asset to teendom: access, and the confidence to slip in and out of personalities, the ability to try on identities, the adolescent equivalent of playing dress-up in the attic, standing before the mirror in heels and lipstick long before you own your own.³⁴

The choice of a blogger's alias can provide clues into his or her character, as well as insight into the personal significance of the naming process. For instance, Tony Pierrro observes,

Jim McKay of Huntington blogs under his real name on his blog "Wabi-Sabi" (www.inblogs.net/jimmckay). Although the name of his blog might not be familiar to most surfing the World Wide Web, it reflects McKay's personal style and view of blogging.

"Wabi-Sabi is described as: 'The beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. The beauty of things modest and humble. The beauty of things unconventional,'" McKay said.³⁵

However, the anonymity of the Internet can also mask the identity of people who, for various reasons, are engaged in some form of deception. As with any relationship, you should develop a relationship gradually; trust should be earned, not assumed.

Web arenas such as blogs and MySpace can serve as personal diaries that give individuals the opportunity to reflect on issues that affect their sense of identity. A poll conducted in 2007 found that the average teenager spends four and a half hours a week blogging or visiting social-sharing sites on the Internet such as MySpace and YouTube, with 22 percent of teenagers blogging five times a week or more.³⁶

In contemporary mass culture, in which people must compete for attention, these virtual arenas give individuals an opportunity to express themselves—to be heard by others as well as to "hear" their own views, thoughts, and attitudes. Ironically, while the Internet technology may be rather sophisticated, it provides a means for an ancient, primitive form of expression—the diary or journal. However, one key difference between traditional diaries and blogs is that while diaries are intensely private, blogs are meant to be shared with a select audience. Individuals are invited to read and respond to the author's comments.

Blogs can also serve as social networks. Several different configurations of blogs have emerged:

- An *aggregation* is a collection in which different bloggers contribute to a body of work on a particular topic.
- A *cloud* of blogs is an informal network, in which bloggers post their thoughts, followed by other bloggers' comments
- *Resyndicated* blogs refer to blogs from around the virtual universe that are republished on one site.
- *Carnival* blogs consist of one blog compiling the most up-to-date information on a topic each week. These posts are either submitted by individual bloggers or are collected by a designated person.
- *Group blogs* are composed of a community of people with a common purpose, values, and goals. John Tropea observes, "It's within a community that has a leader, moderator, members, forum, etc . . . ; basically a community of practice with a social network feature."³⁷
- *Branded blogs* are a formal network in which the blogger formally "registers" the topic, making it easier for individuals to locate it or contribute to the community of bloggers.

Blog sites can also serve as vehicles to both record and learn about local history. For instance, History Matters, a British organization, established a campaign in 2006 to raise awareness of the importance of history in the everyday lives of individuals and to encourage involvement in heritage, by creating the world's biggest blog. On October 17, as many people as possible uploaded their own blog entries, contributing to a "national blog" housed in the British Library as a record of national life. October 17 was selected at random, as a day to record national life.

Another technological avenue for self-examination is the *video diary*, a form of personal storytelling in which videographers use the conventions of the medium—narrative structure, plot, and character—to tell their stories to a broad-based audience. These diaries record the artists' personal experiences. At the same time, these videos also reflect broader individual and cultural issues. Ellen Schneider, a video diarist explains,

Why, we asked, were [the video diarists] willing to make private moments public? "To use my reunion with a grown sister I've never known as a kind of emblem for the black family experience in America today," answered Meredith Woods in St. Paul. "A personal search for justice," said Jeffrey Tuchman in Los Angeles, who shot 20 hours of tape when

he accompanied his father back to Germany to confront the Nazi officer who killed his grandmother. "We wanted to offer unscripted glimpses into our lives," replied Herbert Peck in New York, whose diary documents his wife's normal pregnancy through the birth of a son with Down's Syndrome. "Video diarists are taking risks . . . but also showing the power of what TV can be."³⁸

Programs featuring video diarists have been presented on public television stations in New York; St. Paul, Minnesota; Los Angeles; and San Francisco.

Empowerment Strategies

After having gone through an extensive experience in media literacy, you are left with what may be termed the *quintessential so-what?*: that is, what steps can you take to act on your knowledge and understanding of the media and media content? The Aspen Institute National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy raises this critical issue of possible applications of this body of knowledge: "Is media literacy important only to the extent that it enables one to be a better citizen in society? What is the role of ideology in the process? To what extent is an individual 'media literate' if she just appreciates the aesthetics of a message without going further with it?"³⁹

Empowerment strategies encourage audience members to assume an active role in determining media content. Rather than expect that the media industry will protect citizens from irresponsible images and messages, the empowerment view holds that individuals must assume responsibility for understanding the political, social, and economic influence of the media. Thus, empowerment strategies enable audience members to change the way in which they respond to and interact with the media.

Empowerment Circle

Eddie Dick and Elizabeth Thoman advocate a four-step approach by which media literacy can effect social change, which they refer to as the *empowerment circle*:

- *Awareness.* Use the tools of media literacy to examine and understand the impact of media messages, including: (1) becoming

well-informed in matters of media coverage; (2) discussing media programming with friends, colleagues, and children.

- *Analysis.* Examine the political, economic, social, and cultural factors that shape media messages. This may involve the following steps: (1) developing a sensitivity to programming trends as a way of learning about the culture; (2) keeping abreast of patterns in ownership and government regulations that affect the media industry.
- *Reflection.* Consider the role of the media in individual decision making, lifestyle, attitudes, and values.
- *Action.* Decide on appropriate strategies on the basis of the first three steps. These strategies can include: (1) discussing media content with friends, colleagues, and children; (2) exercising critical choices in personal use of media; (3) writing letters to the editor or to a TV station; (4) meeting with the staff of the newspaper, TV, or radio station; (5) boycotting the advertisers of the program or newspaper; (6) promoting the instruction of media literacy throughout the school system (K-12) by contacting members of the local board of education, PTA, and principals; (7) joining media literacy organizations.⁴⁰

Emancipatory Media Programming

Another action step consists of the production of *emancipatory media programming*—programs that challenge the institutions and values of the dominant culture. Popular television programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* raise questions about the underlying assumptions of the dominant culture.

Yet another empowerment action step involves the development of public response strategies for media policy legislation. The Center for Media Education has proposed a twelve-step action plan that citizens can adopt to help ensure that the public interest is made a part of media and telecommunications policy:

Concentration and Control

1. *Media mergers.* Public interest groups need political support to help make the case against current and future media mergers.
2. *Ownership limits.* Citizens can write letters to FCC commis-

The Daily Show



The Daily Show is an example of emancipatory media programming, which challenges the institutions and values of the dominant culture by raising questions about the underlying assumptions of the dominant culture. (Getty Images; photographer: Peter Kramer)

sioners and congressional representatives supporting strong ownership safeguards.

3. *Broadcaster accountability.* Citizens and community groups can file petitions with the FCC to deny transfer of licenses. They can challenge new owners to live up to their public interest obligations, as well as participate in broadcast license renewals. Also, citizens should fight the proposal at the FCC to extend license renewals from five to eight years.
4. *Cable accountability.* Citizens can urge local officials to demand public interest obligations and safeguards in return for the cable companies' use of public rights-of-way.
5. *Crucial appointments.* Citizens can write to the appropriate government office to support appointments of officials truly independent of the telecommunications industry.

Access and Affordability

6. *Universal service.* Citizens can file and organize in support of access for the poor, and for community institutions, at the FCC and state regulatory agencies, making sure that information-highway access is meaningful and rates truly affordable.
7. *Consumer pricing for broadband service.* Citizens can file petitions with the local public utility commission calling for a consumer-oriented, low-cost, flat-rate tariff for ISDN service.
8. *Competition and consumer protection.* Citizens can join coalitions of national public-interest groups and state public advocates to file at these regulatory agencies, giving them the necessary political support to take on local monopolies by denying them unfair advantages in the marketplace.
9. *Children's television.* Citizens can write to the FCC to urge that it require broadcasters to air a minimum amount of educational programming for children as part of their public service obligation.
10. *Spectrum auctions.* Citizens can tell their representatives and the FCC that the spectrum should be auctioned off, and that the proceeds reinvested for public use.
11. *Open access for video programming.* Citizens can support non-discriminatory access for independent video providers on the new open video systems platforms created for phone companies in the Telecommunications Act. Citizens can also support advocates who are fighting at the FCC for a low rate of programmers on cable companies' leased access channels. Special provisions and rates for educational programming on telephone and cable systems are also needed.
12. *Intellectual property.* Citizens can support the Digital Future Coalition, which is fighting for policies that ensure accessible, affordable, and noncommercial information for the public.⁴¹

Empowerment Strategies in the Classroom

One of the fundamental objectives of media education is the development of critical autonomy, so that students learn to develop an independence from the messages being conveyed through the media. In order to achieve this objective, Len Masterman argues that media education must avoid

the hierarchical, authoritative structure that is characteristic of most classroom environments:

This approach follows closely that practiced by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who argued for a pedagogy which would liberate rather than oppress or domesticate. His approach rests firmly on a belief in our human potential to reflect critically upon our experience, to discover what, within our own and others' experiences, oppresses and limits our thinking and our actions, and finally to act in order to transform those debilitating factors in the interests of all human beings and of the ecological systems of which we are a part.

First and foremost, Freire *trusts* the potentiality and inclination of human beings to move in these directions. Secondly, he also recognizes that most of what passes for education mitigates against this movement for liberation.⁴²

Media literacy scholar Barry Duncan has identified the following strategies designed to promote empowerment in the classroom:

- Try to encourage students to transfer their insights into other areas: schooling, the family, the world of work; otherwise, much of our endeavor will have limited impact.
- Model a variety of individual response to media texts . . . so that students can be introduced to the notions of consent, negotiation and resistance to popular culture texts. Explore the connections between knowledge, pleasure and power.
- Make media studies inquiry centered, and investigative. There should be plenty of room for independent study.⁴³

Autobiographical Analysis

**"I'm No Superman: An Autobiographical Analysis of *Scrubs*"
Dana Keeven, May 2006**

According to Webster University graduate student Dana Keeven, much of the humor of the popular TV sitcom *Scrubs* stems from the characters' coping mechanisms—the ways in which they deal with the pain, suffering, chaos, and unfairness in the world.

Coping strategies enable individuals to deal with the source of their emotional responses as a way of keeping their feelings under control.

Significantly, all of the characters in *Scrubs* use coping strategies to some extent during each and every show, which seems to work very well for them. Some of these coping strategies are quite funny and bizarre, which makes the content pleasurable to watch, but it is important to remember that they are still coping strategies and that some degree of emotional distress is involved.

The *Scrubs* theme song, "Superman," by Lazlo Bane, carries a message about how doctors feel the pressure of trying to live up to their Superman-like title:

*Well, I know what I've been told
You gotta work to feel the soul
But I can't do this all on my own
No, I know I'm no Superman
I'm no Superman*

*Well, I know what I've been told
You gotta know just when to fold
But I can't do this all on my own
No, I know I'm no Superman
I'm no Superman*

The characters on the show are faced with all of the same problems and dilemmas as other doctors and hospital staff, but they just react a little differently. For example, in one episode, J.D. (Zach Braff) has a cancer patient who is undergoing chemotherapy treatment. This woman's immediate family decides to shave their heads to show their support and understanding to her as she loses her hair. Because J.D. is such a great doctor to her, the family asks him to please participate in the "shaving of the heads" too. J.D. is hesitant at first because he is dating a new girl who loves his hair, but he finally decides to do the right thing and shave his head. This is the kind of humorous spin that is put on a serious situation to make it a little more lighthearted. I think that this reaction from J.D. helps everyone involved cope with the situation a little better; the patient, the family, and J.D. And even though it is kind of bizarre, it still has a realness about it, which makes it funny.

Another example of this occurs in a different episode when a favorite patient is in a serious coma, and each member of the staff employs variations of the coping strategy of *diversion*. Dr. Cox (John C. McGinley) and the janitor (Neil Flynn) bond over drinks at the bar and Nurse Carla (Judy Reyes) makes it her mission to make the hospital's gym female friendly. Meanwhile, Dr. Turk (Donald Faison) suggests that J.D. and Elliot find themselves "booty calls." Seeing the "doctors" on the series use this common coping strategy legitimizes the practice.

Individual characters are defined by their unique coping strategies. J.D. often relies on the coping strategy of *envisioning*, in which scenarios play out in an exaggerated (and humorous) fashion that plays out the consequences of his decisions. Since he is the main character of the show, we see things mostly from his point of view, so every thought of his—however inappropriate it may be—becomes literal and materializes onscreen. For example, in an episode during the second season, J.D. once again exercised his bad habit of running his mouth after Dr. Cox scolds him for making a minor mistake. Of course Dr. Cox overhears his snide comment, and as he turns around to let J.D. have it, we can hear (and see) exactly what is running through J.D.'s head. He is thinking, "I wish I had a guy in my life that would stop me before I did something stupid." And as he is thinking this, the scene plays out right before our eyes. We see J.D. in a bar about to kiss a beautiful girl, when all of the sudden this man appears and rips the wig off of her head to reveal that she is in fact a man! To make matters even funnier (and a little strange), the man is an opera singer and he belts out "Mistaaaaake," in an opera-esque fashion right before J.D. is about to make his stupid move.

Another example of a coping strategy exemplified by a character is *partial avoidance*. In an episode from the second season, the topic of conversation around the hospital is chief of medicine Dr. Kelso's wedding anniversary. This is a celebrated holiday at Sacred Heart for one reason, and one reason only: Dr. Kelso is in a good mood on this day, and it is the only day of the year that everyone can fearlessly ask him for things. The surgeons give Turk the task of asking for a new piece of equipment that they need, but Turk forgets and is forced to ask him the following day. Turk fills J.D. in on his awful mistake and the two become distracted by their imaginations as they consider the difference a day can make in the behavior of Dr. Kelso. They envision him head butting a nurse, kicking a man in a wheelchair, and punching a few other nurses and doctors on his path of rage. Because of this far-fetched fear, Turk decides to just avoid asking him for the time being.

Other coping strategies displayed by characters include Dr. Cox's constant behavior of *ridicule*, which tends to be his most dominant coping strategy. J.D. and Turk also share a "one hug a day" rule, which acts as a *comfort mechanism* that enables each of them to cope with the stress of their jobs.

Thus, the coping strategies displayed by the characters of *Scrubs* mirror the techniques commonly employed by viewers. Presenting these coping strategies in the media has a pro-social function, by legitimizing the behavior. Further, this helps to explain the popularity of the series—audience members recognize their own coping strategies in the behaviors of the characters.

Theoretical Framework: Autobiographical Approach to Media Literacy Analysis

Applying the following Lines of Inquiry related to Autobiographical Analysis offers ways to approach the analysis of media and media presentations.

- I. Affective response analysis
 - A. Affective response and personal belief systems
 1. The origins or causes of affective response
 - a. Describe your emotional responses to the media presentation.
 - b. How do you feel at various points of the program?
 - 1). What in particular made you feel that way? Describe or recall specific incidents in detail.
 - c. How does your emotional reaction to the media presentation carry over into your everyday lives?
 - 1) Do you react in the same way to events *outside* of the media?
 - 2) What do these responses reveal about your personal values system?
 2. Pleasure perspective
 - a. What aspects of a media program generate a pleasurable response?
 - 1) What is your favorite program, and why do you enjoy it?
 - 2) Describe your reaction to the program (e.g., Why is it funny? What is the source of the humor?). Be specific.
 - b. What does this exercise reveal about the program?
 - c. Do these same elements trigger a pleasurable response when they appear in other programs?
 - d. What does this reveal about your interests, attitudes, and values?
 3. Coping mechanisms
 - a. Reconstruct the media presentation, focusing on your emotional and physical responses.
 - b. What coping mechanisms did you employ? At what points in the presentation?
 - c. Do you use any of the coping mechanisms elsewhere in your life?

- 1) Are there similarities to the events or themes in the media presentation and to events or themes in your own life?
 - 2) Do you use these coping mechanisms in response to other events or themes in your own life?
 - 3) Is the use of the coping mechanisms effective? Explain.
- B. Affective response analysis: media content
- I. The entrance
 - a. How did you feel about the character when you first saw him or her?
 - b. What accounts for your emotional response?
 - 1) What was the character doing?
 - 2) What was he or she wearing?
 - 3) What did the character say?
 - c. Did the media communicator intend to elicit this response?
 - 1) If so, how does making this emotional connection between character and audience support the themes and worldview of the narrative?
 - d. Did you maintain this initial impression?
 - 1) If not, why? What (if anything) caused this change?
 - 2) Based on his or her actions in the remainder of the story, did the character deserve the emotional response that he or she elicited from you?
 - C. Affective analysis: function
 1. How did you to feel at particular points in the narrative?
 2. Why does the media communicator want you to feel this way?
 3. Do your affective responses provide insight into the media messages? Explain.
 4. Do your affective responses provide insight into your personal belief system?
- II. Identification analysis
- A. Character identification
 - I. Imagine yourself in the role of the primary figure in a media presentation. What insights does this provide into the

sources of power and assumptions about what constitutes “the good life”?

- a. As the lead character, what could you accomplish?
 - b. What opportunities would be available to you?
 - c. What advantages would you have? What could you “get away with” because of your position?
2. Identify favorite characters and explain what you liked and disliked about the characters.
 - a. Clarify the nature of the character identification:
 - 1) Likeness: Do you see a resemblance with the character?
 - 2) Aspiration: Would you like to emulate the character?
 - b. Which attributes of the character make you choose the character as a model?
 - 1) Are these attributes generally regarded as positive or negative? Explain.
 - 2) Is this character a hero or villain in the narrative?
 - c. Name additional attributes of the character that you did *not* include in your original list of attributes.
 - d. Discuss the role that the attributes of the character play in the successful outcome of the story.
 - Were there *missing* attributes in some characters that prevented them from succeeding within the context of the narrative?
 - f. Are there characters in the narrative whom you may like or admire but cannot relate to? Explain.
 3. Oppositional identification: Identify with another character in the media presentation (e.g., a villain, a member of a subculture, a person of the opposite gender, or a supporting character).
 - a. What could you accomplish (as one of *these* characters)?
 - b. What opportunities would be available to you?
 - c. What advantages would you have?
 - d. What could you “get away with” because of your position?
 4. How do you relate to the villains in the narrative?

B. Narrative analysis

1. Narrative reconstruction
 - a. Explicit content: In detail, relate the story of the media program you just saw (read, heard, etc.). What was the story about?
 - 1) What were the significant events in the story?
 - 2) What is the primary story of the plot?
 - 3) What are the subplots, if any?
 - b. Implicit content
 - 1) What are the characters' motives for their actions? Why did the characters behave in the ways that they did?
 - 2) What is the relationship between the significant events in the narrative?
 - 3) What is the relationship between the characters in the narrative?
 - 4) Are the consequences to specific behaviors defined? Explain.
2. Narrative forecasting
 - a. Discuss the role that the admirable character attributes you have identified play in the successful outcome of the story.
 - 1) What role do these attributes play in the outcome of your own lives?
 - 2) Are there other attributes that you haven't identified that play a role in the outcome of the narrative? Explain.
 - b. Put yourselves in the situation depicted in the media presentation.
 - 1) How would you feel about being in that situation?
 - 2) How would you react?
 - 3) Does the situation remind you of your own experience? How?
 - c. Compare the narrative to your own personal experience.
 - 1) Does the situation remind you of your own life? How?
 - 2) How would the characters handle your situation?
 - 3) Would it work? Why or why not?

C. Examine the *limits* of identification (de-identification)

1. In what ways does the media presentation construct a reality which is different from your everyday experience? Be specific.
 2. What production elements are used to construct this reality?
 3. Are the actions of the characters unrealistic? Explain.
- ### III. Media chronicles: Questions to ask when conducting a media chronicles interview
- A. What does this program remind you of? Be specific, detailed.
 - B. How old were you when the program was popular?
 - C. What were you doing when it was popular?
 - D. Can you describe the environment in which you watched the program?
 1. With whom did you watch the program?
 2. Where did you watch the program?
 3. What were you doing while you were watching the program?
 - E. Can you recall the first time you saw or heard the program?
 - F. Can you recall how you felt (scared, amused) while you watched or listened to the program?
 - G. Does the program remind you of any people or experiences?
 - H. Are there any cultural artifacts (e.g., cars, dress) or behaviors appearing on the program that had personal significance in your own life? Explain.
 1. Do you remember any of the characters?
 1. Which characters did you like? Dislike? Why?
 2. Did you identify with any of the characters? Why?
- ### IV. Production elements
- ### V. Empowerment strategies
- A. Empowerment cycle
 - B. Emancipatory media programming
 - C. Public response strategies