CHAPTER 4

Critical Approaches to Media Texts

Key to Topics

4.1 Critical Approaches to Response to a Media Text
4.2 Applying Critical Perspectives to an Ad
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4.4 Semiotic/Narrative Analysis
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One of the basic goals of media literacy is to help students adopt a critical stance in responding to media texts. Taking a critical stance requires that they know how to examine instances of overgeneralization, bias, sensationalized portrayals, and propaganda techniques, in order to identify underlying economic and political agendas. First, students must reach beyond their own initial engagement responses of simple likes or dislikes if they are to critically analyze media texts (Appleman, 2000). In this chapter, you will learn about a number of different critical approaches or lenses that can help students respond critically.

Adopting Different Approaches

In using these different critical approaches with your students, it would be helpful to model your own application of each approach, showing students how you would undertake a narrative analysis, for example, before having them do their own analysis. For certain grade levels, some of these approaches may be too sophisticated, requiring that you clarify or simplify an approach. Middle school students may have difficulty with approaches that require a lot of theoretical analysis.

It is important that you avoid implying that there are certain “correct” interpretations consistent with your own analyses or biases; otherwise students will perceive the analysis as simply a game and will mimic what they assume to be the correct interpretation.

Finally, as suggested by critical pedagogy and cultural studies advocates (Giroux, 2004), it is important to go beyond critique to engage students in some proactive activity challenging status-quo practices. If they discover biased reporting in their local television news, they could then write a letter to the television news director. If they discern racist overtones in a product’s ads, they might make a formal complaint to the company making that product.

For more in-depth discussion of these different approaches see Appleman (2000), Berger (2004), Bertens (2004), Carey-Webb (2001), McRobbie (2005), and Stokes (2003). For introductions to concepts employed in critical analysis of the media, see Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris (2005), Hartley (2002), and Nealon & Giroux (2003). The Website contains links
to different critical theories and approaches relevant to media studies, for example, the theory.org.uk (4.1.2) and Popcultures.org (4.1.4) sites, which summarize different critical approaches to analyzing the media, including definitions by Rhonda Hammer of critical media literacies she teaches through having her students create their own media productions (4.1.1-14).

**APPLYING CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES**

For the rest of this chapter, I will be talking about applying and teaching different critical approaches, using as a focus for much of the discussion a series of magazine and television ads for Coors Light™ beer housed on the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth Website (4.2.1). These ads for Coors™ beer, the third-best selling beer in America, are geared to a youth audience. Research indicated that adolescent alcohol use in the United States continues at a relatively high rate, with the average adolescent female taking her first drink at age 13 (Talan, 2004). Much of this alcohol consumption is linked to exposure to advertising in magazines popular with adolescents such as Rolling Stone and Sports Illustrated (Garfield, Chung, & Rathouz, 2003). These magazine ads typically combine images of alcohol consumption with depictions of females as sex objects and men as sports-lovers and athletes. The Coors Light™ website (4.2.2) contains promotional contests to vote on the “next Coors Light™ Maxim™ Girl Search” as well as contests that equate watching NFL professional football with drinking beer.

**Audience Analysis**

A rhetorical or audience analysis of media texts involves examining how media texts use language, signs, and images to position audiences to adopt certain desired responses, beliefs, or practices (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). Doing such an analysis can also touch upon the research referred to in Chapter 1, regarding whether media texts themselves actually cause change in audiences’ attitudes or behaviors, or whether there are other factors influencing those attitudes and behaviors. As a springboard for discussing whether the positioning in, for example, the Coors beer ads actually causes audiences to perceive women in sexist ways, students could read some of the research reports cited in Chapter 1, as well as discussions about cause/effect models in this research (4.3.1-15). While younger, more impressionable audiences may be influenced by media, a key question remains as to whether (or to what degree) they change their attitudes and beliefs due to exposure to this media. For younger students especially, undertaking an analysis of this kind can provide a window into their responses to advertising messages, as well as an increased awareness of the ways in which ads are constructed to manipulate audiences.

**Identification.** In considering how texts position audiences, students might address the questions: “Who is this text being written for?” and “How am I being positioned by this text?” (Ellsworth, 1997; 4.3.11). A key concept here for critical analysis is the idea of “identification.” Ads are doing more than simply persuading audiences to buy a product. They are seeking to gain an audience’s identification with a certain set of activities or beliefs that can be equated with a product. An L. L. Bean Subaru Outback™ ad that pictures the car driving through a forest equates the car with the image of nature associated with the L. L. Bean™ brand, and thus associates the idea of owning this car with valuing nature. Audiences who identify with the idea of valuing nature may then be attracted to the car, if they associate this positive attribute to use of the product. In the Coors Light™ ad series, drinking Coors Light™ is associated with meeting women in bars and with other popular male activities such as watching NFL football. Adolescent male audiences who identify with these activities then associate engaging in these activities with Coors Light™ beer. Critical analysis of these ads involves challenging these associations: e.g., that alcohol use can be equated with meeting women or having more sex.

Media texts also position audiences to adopt certain stances or attitudes. Students can identify these ideological assumptions by asking: What beliefs or attitudes is this text asking me to accept? For example, the sexist portrayals of females in the Coors Light™ ads implicitly ask audiences to accept the belief that females are sex objects whose primary role is to appeal to males’ “male-gaze” stance (Mulvey, 1975). Once they have identified these underlying assumptions and the stances implied by them, students can consider whether or not they accept those assumptions.

The Website contains links to glossaries of certain key concepts related to audience positioning, such as “copycat effect,” “cultural dope,” “interpellation,” “preferred reading,” and “propaganda model” (4.3.16-16a).
Active Participation. In analyzing audience response to media texts, students may need to be reminded that audiences are more than simply passive targets or dupes of media texts. They need to consider how audiences assume roles as active consumers, performers, or producers in mediascape spectacles or as participants in internet chat rooms, blogs, computer games, interactive television, sports/music events, entertainment retail/shopping, and theme parks (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). As discussed in Chapter 6, in these mediated “youthscapes” (Maira & Soep, 2005) or “scenes” (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004), audiences become members of symbolic, imagined communities: participants in talk-shows, consumers, sports-fans, or television program fans (Harris & Alexander, 1998; Nightingale, 1996). As some of these reports and articles on the Website indicate (4.3.17–19), some audience members actively respond to and construct their own versions of the media, for example, through blogging about their responses online; in the process of responding, they become aware of how they are being positioned.

In my class, students describe their participation on reality TV blogs in which they speculate about whether participants on the show will or will not be successful. They note that they can be influenced by others' interpretations, and that they can be positioned in the group as central or peripheral depending on whether they agree or disagree with the majority opinion emerging in the discussion. They also note that they need to discern the norms for appropriate participation in a discussion site: for example, the degree to which one shares information about one’s personal life or whether one criticizes characters in a show. It might be interesting to have students study some of the online fan clubs and program blogs listed on the Website (4.3.19–27), noting ways in which certain group norms influence how individuals respond.

Socialization as Consumers. Students in my class also study how audiences are socialized by the media to think of consumption as a route to status or popularity. The documentary Merchants of Cool (4.3.33) portrays how commercials equate drinking Sprite™ with “being cool,” a “coolness” with which audiences want to identify. After viewing the documentary in class, my students discuss how they have been socialized to equate consumption of certain brand-name clothes, music, and other products with “coolness” as consumers (4.3.34).

As part of this socialization, audiences may learn to prefer media that are predictable, safe, and familiar: a “McDonaldalization” of the culture. Or, as Douglas Kellner (2000) argues, they experience media as mesmerizing spectacles designed simply to entertain rather than inform mass audiences about current issues; hence, the popularity of nonstop cable news and sensationalized network coverage of disasters, wars, or scandals (4.3.35–39).

The effects of socialization are potentially far-reaching: audiences may grow more concerned as consumers about their own personal well-being rather than about the good of the larger community. They may also become less inclined to critically examine the complicit role of the media in supporting as opposed to challenging governments, as was the case in media’s support for the Iraq War or the “war on terror” (Borjesson, 2005; Schechter, 2006).

One primary aspect of media as spectacle is an emphasis on visual display of televised events at the expense of thoughtful analysis of events, as evident in media coverage of the invasion of Iraq that provided little information about civilian casualties. The links on the Website discuss methods for analyzing the visual rhetoric in the media, particularly the ways in which focusing primarily on visual coverage detracts from analysis of events (4.3.40–47).

A TEACHING IDEA

Interrupting Consumer “Feed”

To foster her students’ awareness of operating in a consumer culture, Becca Dalrymple, a student teacher in our English Education program at the University of Minnesota, created a unit based on the fantasy young adult novel Feed (Anderson, 2002), in which adolescents are continually being fed consumer messages through computer chips in their brains. Becca began the unit by having students identify their consumer habits: what they buy, and what influences what they buy. The students then read popular teen magazines, identified teen consumer norms; and went to a shopping mall and interviewed store employees about their teen patrons. Students also reflected on their feelings about being in the mall: whether they found it stressful, rejuvenating, exciting, boring, and so on.

Students then responded to the first section of Feed, entitled “Eden,” which portrays a world dominated by large corporations. Students discussed their attitudes about large corporations that control much of the media—particularly Clear Channel, Fox News, Disney/ABC, Time Warner, and News Corporation—and identified examples of alternative media texts such as Utne Reader and Mother
Jones magazines that portray perspectives outside of the media conglomerates' texts.

Becca's students then speculated about the types of ads they might receive in the world of Feed, given their own possible consumer "types" and debated positive versus negative aspects of constant advertising or "feeds." They also discussed the way the school in the novel ("Schoof™") is run by corporations to teach students how to consume, and the ways in which adolescents' spending can result in financial debt and depression, as portrayed by the death of one of the characters in the novel, Violet.

For a final writing assignment, students could 1) compare Anderson's novel to Orwell's 1984, 2) create a futuristic society that is similar or different to the society in Feed, 3) survey their peers' consumer habits and create a "handbook" for responsible teenage consumerism, or 4) address an issue associated with media conglomerate control in which they assume an active role in challenging a corporation's control.

Through participating in this unit, students learned to reflect on how they are being positioned to adopt certain values within a consumer culture.

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Semiotic Analysis: Cultural Codes

Semiotic theory focuses on the social and cultural meaning of signs and codes (Scholes, Comley, & Ulmer, 2001; Thwaites, Davis, & Mules, 2002). Signs consist of an image, a word, an object, or even a certain type of practice. The meaning of signs depends on the relationships between the signifier (the image, word, object, or practice), the signified (the implied meaning), and the referent (what the image, word, object, or practice refers to) (Barthes, 1968). For instance, people learn that the colors red and green as signifiers have certain signified meanings—stop and go—with the referent being stopping and starting a car on the street based on a set of cultural codes and conventions. Roland Barthes (1968), a key figure in semiotic theory (4.4.1–3), argues that these meanings are cultural: thus, members of some cultures may not associate the meaning of red with "stop." Semiotic theory can therefore be used to analyze how the meaning of images in media texts is constituted by cultural or ideological codes (see links 4.4.3–9).

In my class, students discuss the meanings they attribute to images from the Coors Light™ ads, or images from some of the many online image data banks (4.4.10–14). One of the Coors Light™ ads (4.2.1) shows mountains in the background, along with the image of a clenched fist emerging from a crowd. Another (4.2.1) employs a 1960s-style psychedelic image of a rock singer. Students note that these images associate Coors Light™ with rock music as an expression of youthful resistance and protest but also with images of mountains and nature associated with freshness.

Codes define the conventions that define meaning of images or signs. An image or sign can have multiple meanings depending upon the different codes used to interpret the sign. The meaning of images of beauty as portrayed in romance novels, soap operas, romantic comedies, or song lyrics is constituted by what Linda Christian-Smith (1990) describes as “codes of beautification”—that a woman’s physical attractiveness contributes to building relationships. In S. E. Hinton’s novel The Outsiders, “the word Cool, the cars that the Socs drive, the imagery of sunsets, and the way that Ponyboy Curtis slouches, his body language, are signs with which these two gangs socially construct themselves” (Moore, 1998, p. 212).

Audiences draw on their knowledge of these codes to interpret the meaning of images and signs; the articles on the Website describe how these cultural codes constitute the meaning of images (4.4.15–19). Students in my class discuss the codes related to masculinity, sports, rock music, and sexuality they use in interpreting the images in the Coors Light™ ads.

Audiences also draw on cultural codes in interpreting the meaning of images in film genres. The codes of the traditional Western genre constituted the meaning of “good” (heroes dressed in white) versus “evil” (the “bad men” dress in black), or the open vistas as defining the West as reflecting the American dream of an “open,” endless development.

Narrative Analysis

Another approach to analyzing media texts involves analysis of the narrative structures or patterns employed in genres such as mystery/detective, comedy, quest/journey, or action/adventure (Huisman, Murphet, Dunn, & Fulton, 2005). The specific events or episodes in stories are defined in terms of how they function to develop the story structure. For example, the meaning of the “road” imagery in Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (Jackson, 2001) reflects the code of the open-ended journey in which the heroes confront multiple challenges within what archetypal critics define as the “romance” quest narrative.

I have my students reflect on how they draw on their knowledge of narrative structures in interpreting
texts or predicting story outcomes: how, for example, they use their mystery genre knowledge to note instances of red herrings in the plot. David Bordwell (1991) argues that audiences are continually applying these learned prototypical schema to organize story events around certain narrative patterns, engage in gap-filling, or predict story outcomes. The Website contains discussions of Bordwell's analysis of narrative structures in films [4.4.21–23] and an analysis of the typical narrative structure of a James Bond movie [4.4.24].

Narrative analysis can be used to identify archetypical story patterns in films: the initiation of adolescents into adulthood in American Graffiti (Lucas, 1973) or Stand by Me (Reiner, 1986), or the journey/quest in the Lord of the Rings trilogy (Jackson, 2001, 2002, 2003), or ironic quests such as Thelma and Louise (Scott, 1991), and so on. The Website contains analyses of typical narrative patterns defined by Northrop Frye: comedy, tragedy, romance quest, and irony, and character types in films [4.4.24–26].

Students can also analyze how narratives reflect certain cultural values. For example, prime-time television dramas often revolve around the portrayal of a particular kind of problem or villain who challenges the status quo; then, at the end, the status quo is restored (Green, 2005). The fact that certain problems are framed as problems in these shows reflects a society's cultural values. For example, the persistent problem of crime in American cities is reflected in the predominance of urban crime-show narratives in prime-time drama, where it is consistently dealt with by police work. This reflects an ideological stance, in that the problem is depicted but the roots of the problem are not. For Green, "we must be shown violence even at the risk of highlighting it or even, occasionally, seeing to glorify it, in order to show the suppression of violence" (p. 90). He notes that these narratives avoid portrayals of causes of crime related to reduction in government support for housing, education, employment, and health care.

To study the ideological assumptions underlying narrative development, my students identify 1) the nature of the problem portrayed in a media text, 2) who solves the problem, and 3) how the problem is solved. They then infer the underlying value assumptions for each of these three components. I also ask them to reflect on the narratives they draw on to interpret texts, and to brainstorm ways of using their own students' knowledge of prototypical narratives found in the media as a basis for story-writing. For example, one high school English teacher, Andrew Huddleston, constructed story-writing activities based on his students' knowledge of professional wrestling as a form of narrative melodrama (Alvermann, Huddleston, & Hagood, 2004). Students graphed the plot lines associated with particular matches related to rising action, climax, and moment of high suspense, as well as comparison of these plots to literary texts. From this activity, students recognize how they used narratives to structure their perceptions of both texts and lived-world events.

From engaging in either semiotic or narrative analysis, students learn how images and narrative structures reflect cultural values. The Website contains further readings on semiotic analysis as well as examples of analyses of magazine advertising images that reflect gender values [4.4.27–32].

Poststructuralist Analysis: Language Categories

A poststructuralist approach examines how language categories in media texts themselves influence characters and audiences' perceptions (Mellor & Patterson, 2001). To take an obvious example, many fantasy and science fiction films revolve around the categories of "good" versus "evil." A poststructuralist analysis examines the limitations of these binary oppositions as reflecting an overly simplistic categorization of characters' actions. The categories "male" versus "female" also represent a binary based on gender stereotypes, for example, that males value physical actions, violence, and operating in public worlds, while females value emotions, relationships, and operating in private worlds (Lacey, 2000; Martino & Mellor, 2000).

In analyzing media texts in my class, students first identify the oppositions operating in the text, for example, "good/evil," "right/wrong," "male/female," "black/white," "high/low," "real/artificial," "love/hate," and so on. In analyzing the Coors Light beer ads, they note that being male is equated with professional football, stock car racing, rock music, and drinking with other males, while being female is equated with being sexual appealing to males. They then note counterexamples that contradict these stereotypical gender categories.

The Website contains further resources for analyzing language categories in media and literary texts, for example, the NCTE Chalkface series of high school textbooks applying poststructuralist analysis
of language in literary and media texts, and a lesson plan for analyzing stereotypical gender categories that serve to essentialize gender differences (4.5.1–6).

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

Another approach for analyzing media texts is known as critical discourse analysis or CDA (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 1996). Discourses consist of more than just language uses. They have to do with larger ideological perspectives that shape how people perceive the world and their own identities. The discourses of law, medicine, religion, business, and education define the social and power relationships within a certain culture or community. People adopting a legal discourse think about the world in a different manner than those adopting a religious discourse. Discourses also serve as “identity toolkits” (Gee, 1996, p. 82) to define one’s identities; for example, the discourse of the law serves to define one’s identity as a lawyer. As ways of knowing and thinking, discourses shape how people define their perceptions of the world and themselves. A lawyer adopting a legal discourse thinks about the world in a very different way than a spiritual leader adopting a religious discourse.

Discourses define what is considered to be “normal” in a social world (Fairclough, 2003), reflecting hegemonic, dominant modes of thinking that permeate a world portrayed in a media text. For example, the film *The Downfall* (Hirschbiegel, 2004), which depicts the final months of Hitler’s reign, portrays Hitler and his supporters’ continued belief in the notion that the Nazis are a superior race who should rule the world.

The Website contains examples of applying discourse analysis to identify these consistent patterns in media texts, particularly in terms of discourses of class and race in media texts (4.6.4–11); see also Dine & Humez (2002) and Lind (2003).

**Discourses of Class.** Neo-Marxist criticism examines how discourses of class serve to define the meaning of social practices or artifacts as class markers and to maintain or challenge power structures (Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003). In his study of the WWE wrestling programs, Henry Jenkins (1997) argues that wrestling represents “working-class melodrama” in that it portrays the revenge of “good” against “evil”–the “bad” wrestler who employs devious means is overcome at the end by the “good” wrestler. Audiences who resent the power and wealth of the elite identify with the “good” wrestler, who represents the “little guys” asserting themselves against the “unfair” power structure.

Neo-Marxists are also interested in how characters in a film or television program possess “cultural capital”—the social practices, dispositions, dress, or language use associated with class or social status in society (Bourdieu, 1977). For example, certain “marked” ways of speaking based on cultural assumptions about dialects, register, pitch, topic elaboration, intonation, or hedging, serve to define one as having or not having “cultural capital,” a theme of the film *Educating Rita* (Gilbert, 1983).

In my class, we view streaming online clips from the PBS documentary program *People Like Us* (4.6.12–13), which examines people’s notions of what it means to be “middle-class” or “working-class.” In one clip, a woman is receiving a set of lessons on appropriate gestures and language use associated with being upper-middle class. After receiving her lessons, the woman then attends a party at an art exhibit to demonstrate what she has learned in her interactions with the wealthy guests. My students note that she does not make a positive impression because it is difficult if not impossible to acquire culture capital in a series of lessons.

My students then analyze magazine ads and store catalogues to identify how certain items are advertised or marketed according to class markers (4.6.14–17). For example, they note that ads in *The New Yorker* magazine appeal to images of wealth and power associated with international travel, expensive cars, and financial advising. The Website contains further examples of analysis of class differences in the media, particularly in terms of applying a Marxist analysis of class—structure differences (4.6.18–27).

**Discourses of Race.** My students also identify discourses of race operating in media texts (Cortes, 2000). In some cases, race is portrayed as simply a matter of individual prejudices or feelings groups adopt about each other—as when characters note that they need to get along better with others or care about others regardless of skin color. This “color-blind” discourse of race fails to acknowledge the institutional racism associated with discriminatory agendas and policies related to housing, employment, schooling, health care, and law enforcement, as well as the deficit notions applied to people of color (4.6.28–30; Bonilla-Silva, 2001). My students examine the portrayal of
institutional racism by noting how non-Whites, particularly African-American males, are demonized as dangerous and suspect, an argument Michael Moore makes in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002). They also analyze how racial difference and conflicts are portrayed as a function of individual feelings and attitudes or as a manifestation of institutional racism. For example, in viewing clips of the film *Malcolm* (Tass, 1986), students discuss how Malcolm X was articulating the problems of race in terms of institutional forces limiting African Americans’ opportunities.

Underlying institutional discourses of racism is a discourse of whiteness that functions as the invisible norm against which non-Whites are judged, a norm that serves to maintain Whites in positions of power (Feagin & O’Brien, 2003). In viewing Hollywood films, students perceive portrayals of whiteness evident in White characters’ obliviousness and insensitivity related to diversity given their sense of White privilege (Bernadi, 2001; Vera & Gordon, 2003). They also note that racism is typically represented in popular media as simply a problem of black oppression and poverty that can be alleviated through adopting a neoliberal political agenda. Giroux (2001) cites the example of the film *Dangerous Minds* (Smith, 1995), in which whiteness is equated with “rationality, ‘tough’ authority, cultural literacy, and high academic standards in the midst of the changing demographics of urban sprawl and the emergence of a resurgent racism in the highly charged politics of the 1990s” (p. 145). In this film, a White ex-Marine teacher asserts her moral authority to inspire her poor urban students caught in a bureaucratic school. The value of her teaching practices is mediated by a discourse of whiteness that promotes the idea that “character, merit, and self-help are the basis on which people take their place in society” (p. 152), reflecting discourses of individual self-control and achievement as opposed to discourses of institutional racism.

My students noted instances of racism in a Coors Light™ beer ad that appeared in the September 2003 issue of *Vibe* magazine that features four young adult black males (4.2.1) looking out from underneath a door with a sign on it stating BOARD OF DIRECTORS and holding bottles of beer. The caption reads, “Here’s to the other 9-to-5.” While they note that this ad is clearly designed to appeal to African Americans in terms of its placement in *Vibe* magazine, it reifies a discourse of White privilege by assuming that young black males in business may be more interested in partying after work than in their work.

Discourses of class and race are also reflected in news coverage. In the following teaching vignette, Martha Cosgrove had her students analyze media analysis of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. One of the interesting aspects of that disaster was that while the media was showing scenes of largely poor African Americans who had no means of escaping New Orleans struggling to stay alive, but receiving little or no assistance from the government, spokespersons for government agencies kept claiming that they were assisting the victims. This points to the critical role the media can play in portraying realities that conflict with political rhetoric.

**A TEACHING IDEA**

**The Opportunity Disaster Provides:**

**From Non-Fiction to Literary Theory to Poetry**

Disasters may be appealing to adolescents because of their inherent qualities: chaos; the anxiety produced by a life-and-death situation; or maybe even the heightened recognition of life held in the balance. For us as teachers, disasters may be appealing for a different reason: because such a self-contained story provides a teachable moment—an opportunity for us to maximize our students’ critical thinking by looking at a single story from a variety of critical perspectives. Reports of the Hurricane Katrina disaster present us with such an opportunity and offer us some great nonfiction reading as well.

For my 12th-grade English class I chose a *New York Times* September 5, 2005, article, "Texas Way Station Offers a First Serving of Hope" (4.6.34), written a week after the hurricane hit. I asked students to 1) choose three short passages they found particularly effective and underline them, 2) explain the reasons for the passages effectiveness, and 3) name the techniques the writer used in the passages—metaphors, vivid imagery, or use of connotations.

The students then met in small groups and each group chose two lenses from among the different literary theories they had previously studied: archetypal, feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, reader-response, historical, and perhaps deconstruction and structuralism (Appleman, 2000). They then chose two passages they believed would be particularly helpful in examining the article from one of those critical perspectives, explained their reasons for their choice, and wrote a statement synthesizing their understanding of the article from the perspective they chose.

I then asked them to suggest other perspectives they thought would be helpful in understanding the situation described in the *New York Times* article. I returned to an allusion from the third paragraph: “Gov. Rick Perry—who delivered an Emma Lazarus—like vow last week to take in the huddled masses of Hurricane Katrina...” No one
knew the reference was a poem engraved on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, so I provided them with a copy (see Website). After reading aloud and looking at the poem on an overhead transparency, we talked about two things. First, our country has prided itself for taking in the tired, poor, huddled masses, the wretched refuse. Second, we talked about what that commitment would mean as we face the aftermath of this disaster. What did they think the implications of Hurricane Katrina might be for other disasters that we may face as a nation (natural and otherwise)? Last, we talked about how the meaning of this article, and the key to how the writers are looking at our handling of this disaster, is contained in large measure in the writer’s careful choice to include Governor Perry’s allusion to the poem written on the Statue of Liberty.

This lesson helped them cross the bridge from real life to literature by ending the lesson with the analysis of a poem that has both historical and literary significance.

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PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORIES: SUBJECTIVE DESIRE

While audience stances are influenced by ideological forces, the meaning of media texts is also shaped by subconscious desires, needs, and fears defining one’s identity (Alcorn, 2002; Holland, 1998; 3.12.23). During the 1970s and 1980s, film theorists were heavily influenced by Freud’s and Jacques Lacan’s (1977) psychoanalytic theories of how subconscious forces shape subjective experiences with film, work published in the journal *Siren* (4.7.1–2). More recently, Judith Butler (1999) criticizes the heterosexual biases of this work, noting the need to study repressed desires for members of the same sex. Because these desires must be repressed in the culture, the result is what Butler describes as “gender melancholia” and the need to move toward more acceptable, official femininity or masculinity (Butler, 1999, p. 87). Angela McRobbie (2005) notes that this “full endorsed femininity” is evident in fashion models’ “self-absorption, aloof disdain” associated with “gender melancholia” related to the loss of repressed same-sex relationships.

Audiences also respond to film actors or actresses as desirable. Laura Mulvey (1975) describes this desire using the concept of the “male gaze” in which the passive female image becomes the object of male desire (4.7.3). In many films, the threatening, “strong” woman is often punished at the end, serving to remove this threat for the presumed male audience adopting the “male gaze.” (4.7.4–5). The Coors Light™ beer ads obviously appeal to the “male gaze” stance through their use of female sex objects. Mulvey’s notion of the “male gaze” has been criticized by others who posit that females can also adopt a “gaze” stance for both males and females (Kaplan, 2000; Modleski, 1988; 4.12.6). And queer theory perspectives related to aspects of perspectives and desire in film posit the need to explore alternative forms of sexuality in media texts and films (4.7.7–9).

Much of the focus of psychoanalytic analysis has to do with how audiences’ subconscious forces influence the subjective meanings of images. For example, a prominent psychoanalytic theorist, Gilles Deleuze (1989), describes how audiences assign subjective meanings to moving images in film. The links on the Website describe his analysis of the meanings of three types of moving images: the perception-image, the action-image, and the affection-image (4.7.10–16).

Students can apply psychoanalytic analysis to films by discussing the functions of desire and fantasy shaping their responses to film characters. They can note how their identification with certain characters or actors/actresses reflects their desires to be or become those characters or actors/actresses as part of the vicarious fantasy experience with film that represents what Norman Holland describes as their identity-style (4.7.17). And they can note how characters’ actions and perceptions are shaped by their desires and fantasies (4.7.18); for an example of analysis of characters in *Sex and the City* (Star, 1998–2004), see Thomas (under review).

Feminist Analysis

Feminist media criticism has undergone a number of shifts as applied to media texts (Brunsdon, D’Acci, & Spigel, 1997; Gallagher, 2001; Mazzarella, 2005). One focus of feminist criticism has been on the sexist portrayals of females and males. For example, Jean Kilbourne, in her *Killing Us Softly, 3* (2000) series and in *Slim Hopes: Advertising & the Obsession with Thinness* (1995), demonstrates how advertising creates gender images that sexualize adolescent females and define norms for body weight associated with the beauty industry (4.8.1–2). In his documentary *Dreamworlds II*, Sut Jhally (1995) demonstrates how MTV music videos portray women as sex objects within the context of an adolescent male fantasy world (4.8.3).

Judith Butler (1999) challenges this focus simply on sexist portrayals, arguing that gender should be perceived as a historical or cultural set of performances...
constituted by competing discourses of gender, for example, what it means to be a “girl,” that are continually changing to adopt to different cultural contexts (4.8.4–8). Butler (1999) refers to the Aretha Franklin lyric, “You make me feel like a natural woman” (p. 98), to note that a woman does not necessarily “feel” feminine all the time, any more than a man feels masculine. Butler suggests that we should think of gender as free-floating and fluid rather than fixed, but also constrained and limited by discourses of desire that position people to adopt different versions of the self.

To apply a feminist approach, students could study how media representations of gender differences are often based on cultural constructions of myths regarding gender differences, for example, that females are more caring than males or that they differ in moral reasoning. An analysis of research on gender differences finds that males and females are far more alike than different (Hyde, 2005).

Butler’s argument that gender performances are continually changing given historical and cultural forces is evident in men’s magazines that exclude the emotional side of males by emphasizing the assertive masculine side of males as reflected in magazines such as Maxim (4.8.8–10), as well as the Coors Light™ beer ads.

The Website includes links to three Media Education Foundation videos related to media representations of masculinity: on the need for males to convey an image of power/control (Tough Guise, 4.8.11); on violence in video games (Game Over, 4.8.12); and on professional wrestling (Wrestling with Manhood, 4.8.13).

In my class, based on feminist media analyses contained on the Website (4.8.14–31), we identify the different gendered versions of identities portrayed in magazines geared exclusively for males and females, as well as the kinds of activities in which males and females are depicted. We then create poster boards with these images from magazines to note patterns in gender portrayals: for example, that contrary to the stereotype that only women are concerned with appearance and fashion, males are also portrayed as having an interest in their appearance or fashion (for a sample production, see 4.8.32). Similarly, in her media literacy class at UCLA, Rhonda Hammer has students create videos critiquing gender representations (4.8.33)—for sample student productions, see 4.8.34. In addition, my students examine critical stances in feminist zines on the Website (4.8.35–37) and portrayals of woman leaders on television, as reflected in the webquest on the television program Commander in Chief (Lurie, 2005–2006) (4.8.38).

Students can also go to the My Pop Studio site (www.mypopstudio.com/)—designed by Sherri Hope Culver and Renee Hobbs at the Temple University’s Media Education Lab to foster girls’ critical analysis of media directed at females. On the site, students create their own versions of a teen magazine, TV show, or music pop star, as well as reflect on their participation in online social networking sites.

**Postmodern Analysis**

Postmodern theory challenges the modernist’s beliefs or “master narratives” associated with “progress,” “truth,” “human improvement,” “high art,” “science,” and “technology”—the assumption that these narratives will lead humans to a greater sense of happiness and fulfillment (Bignell, 2000; Jameson, 1991; Malpas, 2003). Postmodern perspectives are evident in much of contemporary art, film, architecture, fiction, and music, which challenges and even parodies traditional forms.

A leading theorist of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard (1998), posits that we are living in a word of “hyperreality” constructed largely of surface media images that challenge and undermine modernist notions of reality and truth. Rather than assuming that the media represents reality, he argues that the media itself is its own reality in which it is difficult to distinguish what is “real” from what is “false” (for a summary of Baudrillard by Douglas Kellner, see 4.9.1). For example, Disney World is an artificial construction of reality that could be said to function as its own reality in which everything is commodified or commercialized (4.9.2). Postmodernism resists critique by both celebrating and parodying consumer products, as evident in Target™ Corportation ads portraying multiple images of consumer products. For more on Baudrillard’s theories, see 4.9.3.

Postmodern films such as Blue Velvet (Lynch, 1986), Pulp Fiction (Tarantino, 1994), Mulholland Drive (Lynch, 2001), Run Lola Run (Tylkwer, 1988), and Memento (Nolan, 2000) play with alternative narrative versions of events to call attention to the arbitrary nature of narrative structuring of events. Mulholland Drive portrays one version of events in the film’s first part based on the traditional story of the innocent female who arrives in Hollywood to become a successful movie star, only to juxtapose this movie celebrity magazine narrative version against a darker version of the same.
events in the last part in which the star is now involved in a murder of a friend. And Memento shows events occurring in reverse, dealing with issues of memory and time.

In my class, drawing on some introductory readings from the Website about postmodern theories (4.9.4–9), we compare clips from the three different plots/outcomes in Run Lola Run to discuss how different kinds of narrative structures result in different meanings or versions of reality. We also discuss how the use of alternative forms—animation, still photos, and music—serve to mediate the meaning of the different versions. We also debate the larger issue of the value of postmodern media texts. Some students argue that if these texts are simply designed to parody or mimic other texts, they then rarely move beyond critique to promote a set of alternative values. The Website contains further examinations of postmodern analyses of media, including The Simpsons (Groening, 1989–present; 4.9.10), science fiction films (4.9.11), and contemporary media (4.9.12–13).

Postcolonial Analysis

Postcolonial theory examines ways in which colonial or imperialist conceptions of the world are portrayed in literature and media texts (Bhabha, 1994; Gilroy, 2004). It focuses on the fact that much of the media represents the Third World or previously colonized parts of the world as the “other”—that is, as “non-Western”, “backward,” “uncivilized” “mysterious,” “undeveloped,” “primitive,” or “dangerous.” These perceptions stem from 19th- and early-20th-century conceptions of the world in which Western powers still controlled much of the world—for example, in 1914, European countries controlled 85% of world, while today none of the European colonial powers hold colonies. In his study of “Orientalism,” Edward Said (1978) demonstrated how “Orientalism” in popular culture was a racist and sexist discourse for a superior European perception of the Orient as exotic, mysterious, erotic, different, and non-White or “other” (4.10.1–2).

Postcolonial critics posit that Asian, Middle Eastern, African, and/or Muslim characters in Hollywood films continue to be portrayed in ways that reflect European/American stereotypes of these regions and their cultural practices (Gilroy, 2004). In considering reasons for these stereotypes, Homi Bhabha (1994) argues that rather than a simplistic expression of certainty about the colonized, stereotypes reflect the colonial power’s uncertainty, ambivalence, and insecurity about the colonialized (McRobbie, 2005). The fact that these stereotypes are continually repeated and exaggerated reflects the colonizer’s desire for those aspects of the colonialized that they lack (McRobbie, 2005). For example, a black athlete’s physical skills are exaggerated out of a sense of envy of those skills. The stereotype portrays the colonialized as consistently degenerate and incapable of self-rule, serving as a self-serving justification for the colonizer’s need to control the colonialized out of a manufactured fear of their degeneracy (McRobbie, 2005).

We also examine stereotypical media representations of the Mideast and Muslims that reflect a colonial notion that Muslims are incapable of dealing with their own political problems and therefore require Western intervention, as illustrated by the Iraq invasion (for related postcolonial analyses, including a Webquest on British colonialism, see 4.10.4–9). This leads to a discussion of the alternative perspectives to Western coverage of the Mideast on Al-Jazeera, the Arab-based news network (4.10.10), perspectives analyzed in the documentary The Control Room (White, 2005; 4.10.11).

This postcolonial approach is reflected in an activity by Elisa Johnson in which students explored alternative perspectives for thinking about their role in the world.

A TEACHING IDEA

DEFINING “WORLD” IN A WORLD LITERATURE CLASS

Our 11th- and 12th-grade World Literature course began with an investigation of how the world is defined through images, and how these images in turn affect our understanding of the world. To preface a discussion about the constructed nature of our ideas, the students were given journal prompts and created field notes in response to a world maps display.

The students responded in their journals to one or more of the following questions:

1. Do you think everyone’s idea of "world" is the same? If so, how did we all get to that same idea of what "world" is? If not, what factors might influence different ideas of "world"?

2. What do you think is essential in a study of World Literature? Do you think that people in other countries view World Literature in the same way? In what ways might the study of World Literature change depending on your location?

3. Define the world in your own words. What is necessary/essential for something to be considered a world?
Three large maps were posted on the wall of the classroom: a typical world map, a Peters Projection (also known as the “upside-down map”), and a Hobo-Dyer Equal Area Map. In small groups, students took two-column field notes based on their observations of these maps. Students were instructed to write only facts that they noticed in the left-hand column, and only their responses to, or ideas about, these facts in the right-hand column. Students then shared their observations with the whole class. Throughout the discussion, the overwhelming response was one of curiosity about why the creators of the Peters Projection and the Hobo-Dyer map made the world look “weird.” The observations helped the students formulate possible answers to their own questions. Several students noticed that the focus in the Peters and Hobo-Dyer maps was not the United States, as it is in the traditional map. Instead, Africa appeared much larger. As the conversation continued, students began to challenge the images that they saw in the world display. One student noticed that China was colored yellow in each of the maps, and she found this disturbing. To encourage the students to extend their critical analysis about the ways in which the world is a constructed notion, students were asked to bring in an image that should be included in our visual displays of the world based on what they thought was missing from the maps. Additionally, the students wrote about why their images should be included in the maps.

The response to this assignment was diverse and generally positive. Students’ responses included ideas about diverse people living together; the power of money over people’s concepts of the world; social worlds as a mode of defining the world, the natural world and its interconnectivity; and the diversity of human attitudes about abstract ideas such as good and evil. An unexpected outcome of the assignment was that many students created their own images out of magazine and Internet pictures artistically combined to illustrate complex views of the world. The students noticed that many of the images they found from various media sources did not illustrate multifaceted views of our world, but were generally one-sided. Combining these images allowed the students to reconstruct views of the world that they wanted to include in the definition.

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SUMMARY

In this chapter, I argue that it is important that students learn to critically analyze media texts such as Coors Light™ beer commercials that promote alcohol consumption by appealing to common conceptions of masculinity and sexuality. I describe the application of different critical lenses (Appleman, 2000) to media texts: audience analysis of the ways in which media texts position audiences to gain their identification; semiotic analysis of the cultural meanings of images in media texts; poststructuralist analysis of the binary language categories operating in media texts; narrative analysis of the prototypical storylines in media texts; critical discourse analysis of the ideological discourses that define ways of knowing and identities in media texts; psychoanalytic analysis of the subconscious desires that shape audiences’ experiences; feminist analysis of the cultural constructions of gendered practices in media texts; postmodern analysis of how contemporary media texts challenge the artificiality of modernist narratives; and postcolonial analysis of how white, Western media texts often construct non-Western cultures in negative ways. From learning to apply these different critical lenses to media texts, students begin to challenge the ideological and political assumptions operating in media texts, leading them to examine their own beliefs and attitudes about themselves and the world.