Media Literacy: A Primer and Practical Strategies for Video Deconstruction

Media Literacy: A Definition

> "The process of understanding and using the mass media in an assertive and non-passive way. This includes an informed and critical understanding of the nature of the media, the techniques used by them and the impact of these techniques." (Boles, D. 2008)

The goal of this exercise is to (a) provide you, the reader, with a general understanding of the concept, media literacy; and (b) to give you the chance to practice the reflective analysis of videos. Finally, we hope to increase your enthusiasm or motivation to learn more about the topic.

We will introduce you to a set of questions to ask and answer about any media message you encounter and ask you to critique a video your group has selected, using the questions we provide as your guide. In addition, we will ask that you deconstruct the video using a framework of four or five cinematic techniques as your guide (your instructor may have provided additional guidance regarding what to look for in your video). We do not expect that you will be entirely "media literate" at the end of this module. We do hope that you might adopt a critical stance towards media. That is, that you understand the powerful influences – covert, overt, conscious, and unconscious – that media exert. Hopefully, you will have a better sense of the subtle and powerful mechanisms at work as you consume media in your daily lives.

Why does it matter?

Media – images, sounds, videos, graphics, simulations, "edutainment" games – all are created with an audience in mind. **Each is intended to effect change or stimulate one of three primary attributes or dimensions of our psyche: emotions, motivations, behaviors**. Billions of dollars are being spent on research in the advertising and marketing disciplines.

Take a look at the images to the right. What does Santa have to do with Coke? Next, pretty women like men who drink vodka? Finally, who is this cowboy and won't the cigarette light the hay on the ground? Tough guys smoke Marlboro cigarettes?

The rapid advancement of technology – and the new medias that are constantly evolving – provide fertile ground for those who look to design and implement new "cross-media" strategies, aimed at influencing our emotions, motivations, and our behavior (primarily operationalized as purchasing habits). Media literacy aims to provide students and all citizens, with the knowledge and skills to critically reflect on these new media productions and be able to understand (or "deconstruct") the strategies used to move us, to manipulate our appetites, and to persuade us to buy this or do that – emotions, motivations, behaviors.

Besides the product, have you ever thought about what else commercials are selling? We have all heard that "sex sells," but how does it sell? What does it sell? To whom does it sell? These are questions aimed at **deconstructing the video: breaking a video into parts and critiquing why each element was incorporated into the video – what effect is intended?** Other than pairing sexual arousal with a product (or song / group), in what other ways are consumers being convinced to buy products other than being dazzled by what a "product" accomplishes? What emotions are aroused and, maybe, paired with the product? Fear? Contentment? Excitement? What appetites are aroused? Love? Power? Sex? Money? What other ideas must we buy into in order to be sold on Huggies diapers or a new computer/car/soap/shoe or a CD?

And what about products that can save or take lives? In any hour of television you could probably watch an advertisement for a drug commercial and some of these commercials don't even tell us what the drug actually does! Why should you ask your doctor about a drug if you don't even know what it is? As you watch the videos, pay attention to how the video may be trying to create particular emotions, beliefs, motivations, and behaviors.

Practical Guides for Practicing Media Literacy

Macro Level Analysis – The Five Key Questions, and Core Concepts

The following table presents the key attributes of media messages. A central strategy of media literacy is to critique media products (e.g., videos, commercials, print ads, storefronts, radio ads, etc.) along the five central dimensions defined below.

As part of your assignment, you may be asked to create a brief critique of the video, answering each of the five key questions for consumers (beneath the heading, "Deconstruction," in the table) below.

Table 1:
A summary of CML (Consumer's) Key Questions, Core Concepts, and Producer's Key Questions

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CML's Questions/TIPS (Q/TIPS)
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#	Key Words	Deconstruction: CML's 5 Key Questions (Consumer)	CML's 5 Core Concepts	Construction: CML's 5 Key Questions (Producer)
1	Authorship	Who created this message?	All media messages are constructed.	What am I authoring?
2	Format	What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?	Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.	Does my message reflect understanding in format, creativity and technology?
3	Audience	How might different people understand this message differently?	Different people experience the same media message differently.	Is my message engaging and compelling for my target audience?
4	Content	What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message?	Media have embedded values and points of view.	Have I clearly and consistently framed values, lifestyles and points of view in my content?
5	Purpose	Why is this message being sent?	Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.	Have I communicated my purpose effectively?

Micro-Level Analysis – Cinematic Techniques

The following tables illustrate how specific cinematic techniques can be interpreted as promoting one or more emotions, motivations, or behaviors. The table contains a very small subset of the variety of techniques available to those creating media. Again, this should give you a taste for what is possible. Many resources are available at the end of this document, should you want to delve further into this fascinating and important realm relating to our daily consumption of media.

A second aspect of your assignment will be to annotate your video using at least five of the elements contained in the table, below. Include the emotion, motivation or behavior each element is attempting to provoke. There are many ways to view the videos and each of us will have a distinct way of categorizing what we see. The key is (a) an accurate match with film technique and the specific portion of the film illustrating the technique, and (b) a considered description of what effect(s) the producers were trying to elicit from viewers along the lines of emotions, motivations, or behaviors.

Table 2: Common cinematic techniques intended to effect emotions, motivations, and/or behaviors in video advertisements	
Cinematic Technique	**Goal**
Close-up	Intimacy and focus either on actors or on our relationship with actor.
Long shot with pans	Establishing context with the shot providing continuity and a sense of co-presence.
Changing Frame Using Zoom-in or Zoom-out	Visual interest and invitation; drawing in from a general to a specific focus.
Juxtaposing text or other graphic visuals / simulations with close-up or medium close shots	Promoting clarity or emphasis related to key message of the ad.
Music and Background sounds	Strong influence on emotions. Stirring, inspiring, settling, etc.
Clothing	The most powerful means to establish status, and/or setting (e.g., home, work, play) and socio-economic status.
Closing Shot	The finial shot provides the "carry out" message. Is it a directive? A question? Why? What does it intend for you to feel, want, or do?

References and Related Bibliography

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