The Rhetorical Power of **POPULAR CULTURE**

CONSIDERING MEDIATED TEXTS

THIRD EDITION

Deanna D. **SELLNOW**

The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture

Third Edition

I dedicate this revision to all those impacted by the 2016 Pulse shootings in Orlando, Florida—victims, family, friends, and the entire Orlando community. I am so proud to live in a city where love prevails over violence and hate. Let us turn this tragic nightmare into an opportunity for renewal and growth, as examples of what it means to love and respect all of our neighbors as ourselves. As always, to God be the glory!

The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture

Considering Mediated Texts

Third Edition

Deanna D. Sellnow
University of Central Florida

**$SAGE

SAGE

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Brief Contents

Detailed Contents

CHAPTER 3. A NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE 53

CHAPTER 4. A DRAMATISTIC PERSPECTIVE 77

CHAPTER 5.   A SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE PERSPECTIVE 109

Thomas G. Endres, University of Northern Colorado

CHAPTER 6.   A NEO-MARXIST PERSPECTIVE 135

CHAPTER 7.   FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES 161

CHAPTER 8. A MUSIC PERSPECTIVE: THE ILLUSION OF LIFE 199

CHAPTER 9. VISUAL PERSPECTIVES 235

CHAPTER 10. MEDIA-CENTERED PERSPECTIVES   267

Preface

When I wrote the first edition of *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts*, it was a calling. I had been teaching the course for several years and the book was something I had to get out of my head and heart and onto paper. I am thankful for the folks at SAGE who placed their trust in me to offer something of use to my colleagues around the country who teach similar courses. My goal then was to teach readers to think critically about arguments posed in popular culture entertainment media texts using methods of contemporary rhetorical theory and criticism. That remains my goal today. I was pleased to be offered an opportunity to produce a second edition and now a third. It is humbling to realize people appreciate what I offer in these pages. Thank you.

Beginning with the second edition, however, technology affordances and new media have been exploding exponentially. Throughout the third edition, I have made a conscious effort to acknowledge the new challenges and opportunities that come with these advances while remaining true to my original goal. To clarify, when I wrote the first edition, we might have watched major events like the Academy Awards or the president's State of the Union Address and recorded them on our digital video recorders (DVRs) to watch later. Today, we are linked to the world through our smartphones, tablets, laptops, smartwatches, and so on, 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. How many of you reading this right now sleep with your smartphone at your bedside? Do you pick it up to check e-mail, Facebook, or texts when you are awake in the middle of the night? Do you binge watch television programs from an entire season over the course of a weekend? Many people do. Thus, the pervasive power of mediated texts may, in fact, be more influential today than ever before.

I remain convinced that mediated popular culture texts, especially those couched in the form of entertainment, are still particularly powerful in influencing our taken-for-granted beliefs and behaviors about how things ought to be or, perhaps, just are, as well as what is normal and abnormal or desirable and undesirable.

So my goal was and still is to offer a book that anyone—whether a communication major, a college student, or a layperson—can make sense of and can then use the theories contained herein to examine underlying messages about taken-for-granted beliefs and behaviors couched in mediated popular culture texts. This time, however, I made a deliberate attempt to also acknowledge how new media are changing the way we interact with these texts and the arguments embedded within them.

The next sections highlight what's new to this edition and how previous features have been updated to resonate with readers today.

New to This Edition

- In addition to retaining student essays from the previous edition (e.g., *Weeds*, *The Help*, *The Hunger Games*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *Modern Family*, *Firefly*), I have added new student sample essays on, for example, *Game of Thrones*, the Deadheads, *The Devil Wears Prada*, and Nickel Creek's "The Lighthouse's Tale."
- I have expanded coverage of the rhetorical theories that ground the rhetorical perspectives in each chapter.
- New examples (e.g., traditional entertainment media, social media, advertisements) are integrated throughout the chapters.
- Updated statistics and references to contemporary sources are provided throughout the chapters.

Features Retained and Updated in This Edition

Applying What You've Learned, Questioning Your Ethics, and Challenge Features

I continue to believe that it is crucial to provide readers with opportunities to apply concepts to their own life experiences and the popular culture texts with which they are most familiar. This is why I sprinkle "Applying What You've Learned" questions throughout every chapter. We all retain material better when we can apply it to our own lives. Similarly, I integrate "Questioning Your Ethics" questions throughout the chapters to challenge readers to consider what they would do regarding the ethics of various practices. Would they engage in such behaviors? If so or if not, why? Finally, at the end of each chapter, I pose a challenge to view a particular mediated text using the rhetorical perspective described in the chapter. In doing so, readers have an opportunity to make each abstract theory concrete by using it to examine a relevant mediated popular culture text before moving on to learn about another perspective.

Appendix: Writing a Popular Culture Rhetorical Essay

In the appendix, I propose a means by which to prepare a rhetorical analysis essay that could be submitted to a journal for publication and I provide an approach for transforming it into a presentation for an academic conference. My goal in doing so is to provide readers with a systematic approach for getting their analyses out of their heads and onto paper in order to share them with larger audiences. Although the approach I describe for writing an essay and then converting it into a presentation is by no means the only way, it is certainly one model for doing so.

Contemporary Examples, Extended Examples, and Sample Student Essays

Examples are crucial to succeed in making abstract theoretical concepts accessible to readers. I did not want to write a book that only a niche population could understand. Through a variety of examples from television shows (e.g., *Modern Family*, *Shameless*, *Superstore*, *Game of Thrones*, *Black-ish*, *Newsroom, Downton Abbey*, *Weeds*, *Girls*), music (e.g., Nickel Creek, Papa Roach, Eminem, Dixie Chicks, Nine Inch Nails, Taylor Swift, Metallica), films (e.g., *Soul Surfer*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Harry Potter*, *Life Is Beautiful*, *The Help*, *Silver Linings Playbook*, *The Matrix*), advertisements (e.g., for Red Zone, Pond's, Samuel Adams, Budweiser Beer, MasterCard, Jared, Ray-Ban), and comics or cartoons (e.g., *Dennis the Menace*, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *Archer*), readers should clearly see the relevance of these theories for understanding how mediated popular culture texts influence us to believe and behave through covert strategies about what we take for granted as normal and desirable.

Step-by-Step How to Conduct an Analysis Sections for Each Theory Presented

Here my goal is to assist readers as they examine texts of their own choosing via description, interpretation, and evaluation. I believe that by helping readers walk through the systematic analysis process for each perspective applied directly to texts relevant to them, the way they experience mediated popular culture texts will be forever changed. Although they might continue to enjoy mediated popular culture texts, my hope is that readers will no longer do so without understanding what and how such texts are also proposing in terms of arguments about what is normal (and not) and desirable (and not).

Glossary of Key Terms

Although many books offer key terms, I believe doing so is crucial in this book because I want readers to be able to deconstruct academic jargon rather than be confounded by it. Thus, I use jargon of the field and deconstruct it by defining it clearly within each chapter and providing a comprehensive glossary of key terms at the end of the book.

I don't pretend to know all the answers. But I do want to share with my readers the strategies I have learned that help me understand what and how mediated popular culture texts communicate and persuade.

Chapter-by-Chapter Revisions

Chapter 1: This chapter continues to focus on defining popular culture and mediated popular culture as well as providing a rationale for studying it. What is new to this edition are contemporary examples from entertainment and social media, as well as updated statistics and references. I have retained the extended example on *A Charlie Brown Christmas* based on responses from reviewers, as well as from students in my own courses, that it helps provide a clear overview of the rhetorical perspectives to be covered in more detail throughout the book.

Chapter 2: I have retained the historical accounting of the evolution of the rhetorical tradition that was new to the second edition. However, I expand it by inserting contemporary texts because they still represent some of these concepts today. I also expand on the

Sandy Hook example to also include acts of violence and terrorism across the United States (e.g., Boston, San Bernardino, Orlando, Dallas) and the world (e.g., Belgium, France, Turkey) since then. Doing so provides an opportunity to reflect on and examine both the ongoing nature and increasing number of such acts in the modern world and modern age. I have retained the sample student speech on Newt Gingrich's 2012 concession speech; however, I interject questions about it that relate to issues in the 2016 presidential campaign as well.

Chapter 3: I revised this chapter dramatically for the second edition. Thus, for the third edition, I updated examples to include films like *The Martian* and describe how the creators visited a NASA facility to ensure that the story would have ecological validity. I also discuss robots, as they are becoming more and more popular in daily living today. I retained the sample student essay on *The Help* because Alfred Cotton does an excellent job of showcasing how a narrative analysis of this entertainment media text can point to larger issues of racism and classism in society.

Chapter 4: This chapter on dramatism continues to explain Burke's concepts about the dramatistic life cycle, the order-pollution-guilt-purification-redemption process, cluster analysis, and the Pentad. I added comparative examples of Huggies advertisements to illustrate the order-pollution-guilt-purification-redemption process, as well as two new sample student essays (in addition to the one on *Weeds*). One new essay focuses on Lady Gaga's music, persona, and life as a drama according to Burke's theories. The other focuses on the epic fantasy television series *Game of Thrones* using a dramatistic lens, arguing ultimately that the end justifies the means for breaking moral rules for living.

Chapter 5: This chapter, which was new to the second edition, focuses on symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis written and revised by Dr. Thomas G. Endres from the University of Northern Colorado. As a former doctoral student of the late Ernest Bormann, Dr. Endres does a superb job of clarifying the theory and applying it to both the television program *Big Bang Theory* and the cult classic *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. In addition to the sample student essay on the television series *Firefly*, this chapter includes a new sample student essay on the Grateful Dead's superfan following, known as the Deadheads, as a rhetorical community that has lived on beyond the life of the band.

Chapter 6: Although this chapter is titled "A Neo-Marxist Perspective," its scope also includes representatives of the larger genre of critical studies or critical rhetoric that can fit within it. I illustrate aspects of *othering* and hegemony, using examples from television programs such as *The Biggest Loser*, *Mike and Molly*, and *Pretty Wicked*, as well as films such as *Dances With Wolves*, *The Ultimate Gift*, *The Way*, and *Captain Fantastic*. I also offer extended examples from music, such as The Beatles' *Can't Buy Me Love* and Kanye West's *Welcome to Heartbreak*. The chapter closes with sample student essays on *Modern Family* and *Sex and the City*.

Chapter 7: This chapter remains focused on multiple feminist perspectives as related to the waves of feminism. I have expanded the discussion of waves of feminism to include a fourth wave, which acknowledges a view that feminism does not refer only to the struggles and oppression of women but, rather, as a call to action for gender equity broadly conceived. As such, I also continue to include a section on queer theory as a way to explore how texts privilege heteronormativity. Moreover, I include examples from advertisements and television shows (e.g., *New Girl*, *Game of Thrones*, *Girls*, *Veep*), movies (e.g., *The Hunger Games, Boys Don't Cry*), music (e.g., Meredith Brooks's "Bitch," Martina McBride's "This

One's for the Girls," Jamie O'Neal's "Somebody's Hero"), and video games (e.g., BioShock, Grand Theft Auto) to illustrate concepts of feminist perspectives throughout the chapter. I end by pointing to published essays on the representations of gay men on television and I include a sample student essay on the popular movie *The Hunger Games*, focused on Katniss as the hero from a feminist perspective. I have added another sample student essay for this edition focused on the film, *The Devil Wears Prada*.

Chapter 8: I am very pleased with the revision of this chapter because it explains how the illusion of life perspective can be applied to examine the role of both musical sound and lyrical content in conveying arguments in music. I continue to open the chapter with a section that distinguishes musical rhetoric from both musical aesthetics and music as communication. I also explain the role of genre in shaping the argument. I include a host of examples throughout the chapter to illustrate aspects of the perspective (e.g., "I Will Survive" as first made popular by Gloria Gaynor, "Loser" as performed by Beck, "I Think About You" by Collin Raye, "Do They Know It's Christmas?" by the Band Aid charity group, and "We Are the World" by Live Aid). The chapter closes with a sample student essay examining music from Creed, as well as a new sample student essay on "The Lighthouse's Tale" by Nickel Creek.

Chapter 9: As with the music chapter, I begin by distinguishing visual rhetoric from visual art aesthetics. Then I include a new section about the history and nature of visual communication, as well as a discussion of gestalt, semiotics, and cognitive theories, before moving into visual pleasure theory as an example of one psychoanalytical cognitive theory approach to examine visual arguments embedded in mediated popular culture texts. I have also taken care to illustrate how the theory has been expanded to include visual images of women, men, race, and multiple sexualities. I have also added visual figures to illustrate concepts throughout the chapter, as well as social media examples such as emoticons, emojis, acronyms, and massive multiplayer online games (MMOGs). I have retained the sample student essay on *Boys Don't Cry* that closes this chapter, because it reveals rhetorical strategies inviting viewers to embrace transgendered sexuality as appropriate rather than deviant. I have added questions to consider regarding the evolution of ideology regarding transgender and transgender issues since the film was first released.

Chapter 10: This chapter remains focused on media-centered perspectives but is expanded to intentionally acknowledge the important role of new media and research conducted about it today. I have expanded the theoretical discussion to include media ecology theory to include contemporary research suggesting that polymedia helps understand new relationships between the social and the technological. I also offer examples of robot technology, MMOGs, and games and apps such as McWorld, Grand Theft Auto, and Pokémon Go. I have retained the sample student essay focused on realism and intimacy conveyed in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. However, I add some questions pointing to contemporary phenomena, such as the Harry Potter attraction at Universal Studies, as it may embellish the author's analysis.

Acknowledgments

I thank the SAGE team for keeping me on task when I, like so many, can become distracted by other obligations in my life. Doing so is a tall order. I also thank those individuals teaching courses with my book who shared student essays for this edition, as well as those reviewing and providing suggestions to make this third edition even stronger than the first two. Finally, I thank all who guided my hand in writing this book. I am forever grateful for being allowed to serve as the conduit for getting these ideas from the "Ivory Towers of the academy" to its readers. Thank you!

SAGE Publishing gratefully acknowledges the following reviewers for their kind assistance:

Third Edition

Marcy Chvasta, California State University, Stanislaus; Mandy Macklin, California State University Northridge; Terri Russ, St. Mary's College; George Simons, JAMK University of Applied Sciences.

Second Edition

Mary Elizabeth Bezanson, University of Minnesota, Morris; Valerie L. Guyant, University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire; Randy Harris, University of Waterloo; Agnieszka Kampka, Warsaw University of Life Sciences; Steven Listopad, Jamestown College; and LaChrystal D. Ricke, Sam Houston State University.

First Edition

Bernardo Alexander Attias, California State University, Northridge; Christine Harold, University of Washington; Richard K. Olsen, Jr., University of North Carolina at Wilmington; John Pauly, Marquette University; Kendall R. Phillips, Syracuse University; Pravin A. Rodrigues, Ashland University; Raymond I. Schuck, Bowling Green State University; Roger Stahl, University of Georgia; Mark Allan Steiner, Christopher Newport University; and Kathleen Vidoloff, University of Kentucky.

Chapter 1

What Is Popular Culture and Why Study It?

Take a moment or two to jot down a favorite: (1) movie, (2) television program, (3) song, (4) cartoon, (5) comic strip, and (6) advertisement. Beside each selection, identify in a sentence or two why it is a favorite of yours. The reasons you offer actually demonstrate the influential role each one plays in how you interpret the world around you. Now jot down a friend or family member's favorite that you don't like at all. What assumptions do you make about this individual's beliefs, attitudes, and values because he or she likes it?

Research has shown that these and other forms of entertainment can both reflect and shape what people believe and how we behave. If you are reading this book, I suspect this statement does not surprise you. What you may not know, however, is how these movies, television programs, songs, cartoons, comic strips, and advertisements actually do so. The purpose of this book, then, is to equip you with tools to analyze their underlying messages that advocate a particular viewpoint about how we "ought to" and "ought not to" believe and behave. By the time you finish this book, you will be a more critical consumer and able to make educated choices about whether or not to embrace such messages as valid in your own life.

Developing your ability to make educated choices is particularly important when it comes to entertainment media (e.g., movies, television programs, songs, cartoons, comic strips, as well as YouTube videos and memes). Why? Some reasons include satisfying curiosity about the variety of topics and issues explored in them, developing self-awareness about your own norms and values, and increasing understanding about why you believe and behave as you do. Another reason might be because influential messages couched in

entertainment media can be used ethically or unethically. **Ethics** refers to principles about what is right and wrong, moral and immoral, fair and unfair (Johannesen, 1990; Nilsen, 1974; Wallace, 1955). Unlike legal choices that are governed by rules to which we must abide, ethical choices are guided by our values, conscience, and sense of fairness. As such, producers of entertainment media may operate by ethical standards that differ from yours. Developing your ability to discern those underlying ethics-based messages couched in entertainment media empowers you to choose whether or not to be influenced by them.

This chapter lays the groundwork for studying popular culture as rhetoric by, first, defining *popular culture* and *mediated popular culture texts* as they relate to other definitions of culture and texts. Second, the chapter provides a clear rationale for studying popular culture as rhetoric. Third, the chapter presents a systematic approach for examining underlying messages embedded in popular culture texts using an extended example for comparison. By the time you finish the chapter, I hope you will be eager to expand your understanding of and ability to examine the many kinds of popular culture texts that pervade daily life.

WHAT IS POPULAR CULTURE?

To fully understand what popular culture is, it is particularly helpful to begin by explaining what it is not. Let us begin with the concept of *culture* and then move on to the concept of *popular culture.*

Sometimes the word *culture* is defined within an elitist context. That is, one definition of the concept of *cultured* refers to the means by which to improve one's station in life. I must admit I encouraged my children to play in the school orchestra because I believed it was a means of self-improvement for them. After all, musical ability has been positively correlated with intellectual capacity and leadership potential. *Culture* is also often defined within a diversity context (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation). For example, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religions could denote different cultures. Although these demographic characteristics often play roles in determining target audiences of various movies, songs, advertisements, and such, they are insufficient for defining popular culture.

APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED . . .

Have you ever gone to an event like a symphony, a play, an opera, or some other sophisticated dinner, reception, or social event as a means by which to become more cultured? If so, was it your idea or someone else's? What do you recall from the experience? Do you think it influenced your appreciation for fine and performing arts? Why or why not?

Popular culture, in contrast, is not associated with the elitist definition of becoming cultured to improve oneself nor is it narrowly defined by demographic characteristics of a community or group. Rather, for the purposes of this book, **popular culture** is composed

of the everyday objects, actions, and events that influence people to believe and behave in certain ways. (Essentially, everything we experience in our daily lives could be considered an element of popular culture.) They do so through subtle messages proposing a particular perspective about what is "appropriate" and "inappropriate," "desirable" and "undesirable," "good" and "bad," and so on.

Because this definition of popular culture is so broad, we focus specifically on mediated popular culture in this book. **Mediated popular culture** can be defined as the everyday objects, actions, and events we experience through a media channel that may influence us to believe and behave in certain ways. We encounter mediated popular culture via **old media**—which includes both print media (e.g., magazines, newspapers, billboards, brochures) and traditional electronic media (e.g., television, radio)—as well as new media. For the purposes of our discussions, **new media** consist of all forms of digital media (e.g., social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest, as well as multiplayer gaming sites) accessed from the Internet and satellite via computers and various handheld devices.

Mediated popular culture pervades our daily lives. In fact, since the first edition of this text was published, mediated popular culture has become increasingly infused in our lives 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. Check out these comparisons to illustrate my point. Annual sales of smartphones worldwide jumped from 131 million in 2008 to 310 million in 2012 to 374 million in 2016, with an estimated 1.5 billion smartphone users worldwide (Gartner, 2016; Neeraj, 2015; Parks Associates, 2012). Moreover, according to Nielsen research, people spent about 11 hours a day on their smartphones, tablets, televisions, radios, computers, and video games in 2016 (Bauder, 2016). A whopping 30.32 million smartwatches were sold in 2015 and sales are expected to grow 48 % from 2015 through 2017 (Gartner, 2016). In 2008, Facebook had about 90 million members compared to 938 million in 2012 (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2012) and 1.65 billion active users in 2016 (Smith, 2016). Twitter had less than 1 million users in 2008 compared to more than 500 million in 2012 (Lunden, 2012) and nearly 646 million registered users in 2016 (Twitter Statistics, 2016). Tablets didn't even exist in 2008. In 2012, 120 million were purchased, which represents a 98 percent increase from the 60 million purchased in 2011 (Gartner, 2012). And the number of downloadable apps increased from about 10,000 by the end of 2008 to more than 700,000 by the end of 2012 (Etherington, 2012; Thurner, 2012) and to over 2 million in 2016 (Statistica, 2016).

Thanks to this technology explosion of new media, we now have access to friends, family, coworkers, information and entertainment sources, as well as advertisements and shopping outlets across the globe nearly anytime and anyplace. Wireless (Wi-Fi) technology provides quick and easy access in homes, schools, libraries, shopping centers, waiting rooms, restaurants, and hotels, as well as in planes, trains, and automobiles.

Although accessibility in some ways liberates us and increases productivity, it can also consume us and decrease productivity even to the point of disrupting our ability to function effectively in occupational and social interactions (Kung, 2012). One such condition that is becoming more prevalent is **nomophobia**, which refers to a fear of being out of mobile phone contact (D'Agata, 2008). According to recent surveys, 66 percent of us are afraid to be separated from our cell phones, 40 percent would begin to miss our phone in

less than an hour without it, and as many as 11 percent would, in fact, rather leave home without pants than without a phone (SecureEnvoy, 2012). Another debilitating condition is Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD), which refers to excessive computer use that interferes with daily life (Byun et al., 2009). This addiction causes the same kinds of changes in the brain as observed in alcoholics and drug addicts and is now being diagnosed in 5 to 10 percent of the population (Jaslow, 2012). With the ever-increasing accessibility to and use of new and old media, understanding what and how they communicate seems even more imperative today than ever before.

Assess Yourself: Are You Addicted to the Internet?

Go to this website to take a 20-question quiz to determine whether you might be considered an Internet addict: http://netaddiction.com/internet-addiction-test/.

Mediated popular culture texts communicate to and for us regarding what we think we ought to and ought not to believe and do during every waking moment. To clarify, allow me to use my encounters with mediated popular culture texts before going to work one morning. At 5 A.M., I awoke to my alarm, which is set to a local radio station. Before I even got out of bed, I was influenced by a story I heard about a New York City police officer who purchased boots for a homeless man. A bystander had snapped a picture of the event on her smartphone and posted it on Facebook, which went viral. That story influenced me in several ways. It confirmed my belief that it is desirable and good to help those in need. It also influenced me that I, too, should think about what I ought to do to pay it forward, so-to-speak, in my own community. I decided to go online to make a donation to the local food bank. After making my donation, I checked Facebook to see the photograph for myself. Good people, I surmised, help those in need.

I then went to the kitchen where I poured myself a cup of coffee, picked up the newspaper, and turned the television to The Weather Channel (TWC). I watch TWC every morning because the "Local on the 8s" segment helps me decide what I ought to wear. I also enjoy the banter that usually goes on among the meteorologists. They seem to genuinely enjoy working with each other. As I watch, I think it is both appropriate and desirable to enjoy what you do and to have fun while doing it. The newspaper further reinforced my belief that it is *good* to help those in need and my belief that there are still good people in the world when I read a story about 5,000 blankets, toys, and clothing items that were donated to various shelters across the state this month.

Mediated popular culture messages also shape how I ought not to believe and behave. For instance, my belief that we ought not to be able to purchase assault weapons of war was reinforced as I watched the news reports unfold about the mass shooting terrorist attack at a nightclub right here where I live in Florida. And while I perused *US Weekly*, my belief that it is bad for women to starve themselves to be thin was reinforced when I saw

a picture of country singer LeAnn Rimes's "popsicle-stick" figure. My opinion that creative geniuses often struggle with alcohol or drugs as a coping mechanism was confirmed when I read yet another story about the sudden death of musical genius, Prince, at age 57. As I paged through the magazine, I noticed a picture of Mary-Kate Olsen smoking a cigarette and thought, "I wish she wouldn't do that because smoking is bad." And as I looked at the outfits on the "Fashion Police" pages and read the comments accompanying them suggesting which ones looked good and bad, I made a mental note about inappropriate and undesirable attire. These kinds of images and stories influence us by shaping our beliefs and behaviors.

APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED . . .

Identify messages that have been sent to you so far today via media, friends, or observations. What beliefs or behaviors did they reinforce or challenge for you about what is "appropriate" or "inappropriate," "desirable" or "undesirable," "good" or "bad," and why?

QUESTIONING YOUR ETHICS . . .

Do you think it is "appropriate" or "inappropriate" to consume alcohol during a business lunch meeting? Consider now the Samuel Adams beer commercials where several businessmen order water until one fellow orders a Samuel Adams beer. At that time, the others quickly change their orders to Samuel Adams beer as well. If you are not familiar with the ad, you can watch it here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4BOQ804McE

What is this commercial arguing about? Whether or not it is OK to consume alcohol during a business lunch meeting? Now go watch this short video online: http://adland.tv/commercials/sam-adams-samuel-adams-business-lunch-2003-030-usa.

What messages is it proposing about consuming alcohol as "appropriate" or "inappropriate" and "desirable" or "undesirable"?

WHAT ARE POPULAR CULTURE TEXTS?

Popular culture communicates to us and for us through signs and artifacts. A **sign** is simply something that makes you think of something else. For example, when I look at the ring on the third finger of my left hand, I think of what that means in terms of the bond of marriage. I also reminisce about when my spouse and I purchased our first wedding rings more than 30 years ago. And, I think of the summer when we replaced our first wedding rings

with new rings we purchased in a favorite vacation spot (Medora, North Dakota). An **artifact** is a sign or series of signs that is socially grounded. That is, its meaning is widely shared by some identifiable community or cultural group. The ring I just described can be considered an artifact for the dominant American culture in terms of symbolizing the bond of marriage but not in terms of the personal meanings I described. Those personal meanings are valid signs but only for my spouse and me. When we analyze the communicative potential of popular culture, then, we look for signs that function as artifacts.

Each of us is a member of (or identifies with) more than one cultural group simultaneously. The various groups with which we identify often share characteristics, beliefs, or value systems. For example, I am a parent, a college professor, a Christian, a pet owner, and a middle-class American, among other things. Each of these groups is distinct, yet I identify myself with each of them. Moreover, some beliefs are held by all of them, and others are not.

Each cultural group is also identifiable because it embraces an ideology. An **ideology** is a cultural group's perceptions about the way things are and assumptions about the way they ought to be. Thus, an ideology is not a factual description of objects and events but rather a perception shared by members of a particular group. For example, as a pet owner, I embrace a perception that pets are good for families with kids because pets are loving and lovable. This is not a factual statement but rather a perception I share with others who identify with the pet owners cultural group. A factual statement, on the other hand, might merely be that pets are domesticated animals some people choose to own.

Ideologies are formed, reinforced, and sometimes reformed through rhetoric. **Rhetoric** can be defined simply as messages designed to influence people. In other words, rhetoric is persuasive communication. A **rhetorical argument**, then, is a persuasive message designed to reinforce or challenge a taken-for-granted belief or behavior about what is "appropriate" or "inappropriate," "desirable" or "undesirable," "good" or "bad."

Rhetorical arguments are conveyed through texts. A **text** is any set of interrelated signs and artifacts that contribute to a unified message. Texts argue rhetorically as sites of struggle that confirm or disconfirm an ideology held by a cultural group (Brummett, 2011, pp. 77–80). Texts can be, but are not limited to, books and other written materials. A **popular culture text**, for example, is any set of interrelated written, oral, or visual signs and artifacts focused on everyday objects, actions, and events that contribute to a rhetorical argument. A **mediated popular culture text** is a subset of the broad range of popular culture texts limited to those conveyed through media channels (e.g., movies, music, television programs, advertisements, comic strips, websites, memes, digital games).

To illustrate how rhetorical arguments are conveyed through mediated popular culture texts, let us focus, for example, on the ideological debate in the United States regarding marriage. Some groups hold firm to the ideology that the right to marry should be limited to heterosexual partners, and other groups believe the right to marry should be available to all committed partners regardless of sexual orientation. Consider now how different mediated popular culture texts argue in ways that support or oppose one of these competing ideologies. How might the rhetorical argument differ among television's *Modern Family*, *Cougar Town*, *The New Normal*, *Big Bang Theory*, and *Awkward* or among movies such as *The Birdcage*, *The Kids Are All Right*, *Carol*, *Concussion*, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, *The Vow*, *Love Actually*, and *What to Expect When You're Expecting*?

This book focuses on mediated popular culture texts for a number of reasons. First, we can usually demarcate a beginning and an end to something like a film, advertisement, or song, at least for analytical purposes. Second, mediated texts—particularly those couched as mere entertainment (e.g., popular music, blockbuster movies, television sitcoms)—can be particularly influential because consumers often fail to realize their persuasive potential. Limiting my examples in this way does not in any way mean that these are the only examples of popular culture texts, but rather, they provide a focus for this book.

WHY STUDY POPULAR CULTURE?

Because popular culture consists of everyday objects, actions, and events, people sometimes fail to see the rationale for studying it. Yet the fact that popular culture communicates and persuades in these subtle and covert, or hidden, ways actually points to the need for such study. As noted earlier, ultimately, popular culture persuades by empowering and disempowering certain people and groups by conveying messages about "desirable" and "undesirable," "appropriate" and "inappropriate," or "normal" and "abnormal" beliefs and behaviors.

Thus, popular culture is significant because it has the persuasive power to shape beliefs and behaviors. Doing so successfully can have positive or negative implications. For example, according to the standards set by the American Dietetic Association, most female television actresses are notably underweight. These images and the assumptions they make about what the "ideal" woman *ought to* look like have been shown to influence women's perceptions of their own bodies (Harrison, 2000). To help clarify this point, a study was conducted a number of years ago on the remote island of Fiji. Before the introduction of satellite television, about 3 percent of the island's adolescent girls reported to have dieted. Two years later—after the introduction of satellite television—that figure rose to 66 percent. Moreover, 15 percent of these girls admitted they had vomited to control their weight (Becker, Grinspoon, Klibanski, & Herzog, 1999). More recently, supermodel Molly Sims shared her battle to overcome a negative body image (you can read the interview transcript here: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/molly-sims-opens-up-about-overcoming-years-of-body-negativity_us_563ce924e4b0411d3070d1c9).

These examples illustrate the negative consequences of rhetorical arguments conveyed in mediated popular culture texts. However, the rhetorical arguments made in such texts can also shape beliefs and behaviors in ways that promote positive consequences. Consider, for example, the growing number of feature films and documentaries focused on understanding and respecting people who live with a disability. In 2010, HBO produced a biopic about the real life of Temple Grandin, an animal science professor who, thanks in part to her unique experiences of living with autism, improved the ethical treatment of animals. Similarly, in 2011, NGN Productions released a film called *A Mile in His Shoes* about a young hurler living with autism who inspired the players and coaches on a minor league baseball team. *Music Within*, initially released in 2007, tells the true story of what two Vietnam veterans did to help get the Americans With Disabilities Act passed. *Soul Surfer*, released in 2011, is based on the true story of Bethany Hamilton and her courageous exploits after losing her arm to

a shark. *Front of the Class*, a 2008 Hallmark Hall of Fame made-for-television movie, is based on the true story of Brad Cohen, a gifted teacher who also lives with Tourette syndrome. The American reality television series *Push Girls*, which debuted on the Sundance Channel in 2012, follows the lives of four paralyzed women and their daily challenges and triumphs. In 2015, A&E launched a program called *Born This Way*, which follows seven young adults with Down syndrome as they navigate relationships and jobs, as well as achieve greater independence. And on the award-winning Showtime television series *Homeland*, CIA agent Carrie Mathison also lives with bipolar disorder. Films and television programs like these encourage viewers to realize people who happen to live with a disability are real people who think, feel, and make meaningful contributions to society. In doing so, they challenge an ideology about what is "normal," "desirable," and "appropriate."

Popular culture is also important to study because of its persuasive power to reinforce taken-for-granted beliefs and behaviors. By examining these arguments, we can make informed choices about whether to accept them as normal, desirable, or appropriate. Consider for a moment the dominant American ideology surrounding the notion of *family*. Programs like *Leave It to Beaver* in the 1950s reinforced a taken-for-granted belief that a "normal" family was one where the father worked outside the home and the mother did not. In the 1960s and 1970s, programs like *I Love Lucy* and *The Brady Bunch*, while challenging other taken-for-granted beliefs, continued to reinforce this ideology. Although the 1980s introduced programs like *The Cosby Show*, where the mother who worked outside the home was portrayed as normal, such shows continued to be the exception, not the rule.

Even into the 21st century, some of the most popular television shows about families with children depict mothers who do not work outside the home (e.g., *Everybody Loves Raymond* [1996–2005]; *According to Jim* [2001–2007]; *Parenthood* [2010–2015]) or work part-time while still running the household (e.g., *Malcolm in the Middle* [2000–2006]; *Everybody Hates Chris* [2005–2009]; *The Middle* [2009–]). At the same time, many shows that actually depict men raising children or running the household often focus on their inability to do it well (e.g., *Titus* [2000–2002]; *Arrested Development* [2003–2006]; *Two and a Half Men* [2003–2015]). In doing so, these shows also reinforce the notion that the "normal" role for men is not raising children or caring for the home.

To further illustrate this point, let's consider the popular television show *Modern Family*. In it, the family portrayed as "typical" is the Dunphy family. The family consists of a heterosexual couple with three children, where the father works outside home and the mother does not. Even though all of the parents in *Modern Family* are at times depicted as inept, most of the male characters are portrayed consistently as not being good at raising children or caring for the home. The one exception is Cam. But he is also portrayed as an effeminate gay man in contrast to the other, "typical" men.

In contrast, several recently launched television sitcoms are challenging some of these dominant American ideological perceptions of family. For example, *The Fosters* (2013–) is about a lesbian couple raising adopted, biological, and foster children. *Black-ish* (2014–) is about an upper-middle-class Black family negotiating life while living in the suburbs, and *Fresh off the Boat* (2015–) is about an Asian American family running a restaurant and raising a family.

The previous examples point to another reason to study popular culture. Popular culture texts shape beliefs and behaviors both (1) in covert ways and (2) on multiple levels. For example, among other things, *The Brady Bunch* (1969–1974) argued that normal middle-class family homes are always neat and tidy. Contrast this with *Roseanne* (1988–1997), *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000–2006), *Shameless* (2011–), or *The Middle* (2009–) and you will see what I mean. *The Brady Bunch* employs Alice as their full-time housekeeper, which argues covertly (among other things) that a neat and tidy home is desirable for normal middle-class families. Moreover, washing clothes, doing dishes, tidying rooms, cleaning house, and mowing the lawn are embedded in the day-to-day routine of each episode. None of the families in the other programs employ a housekeeper, and their homes are rarely depicted as neat and tidy. In fact, when cleaning or tidying up is part of an episode's plot, doing so is often portrayed as a disgusting chore or nuisance rather than a normal part of the family's day-to-day routine. Thus, the different arguments about whether it is normal for middle-class homes to be neat and tidy are conveyed covertly and on multiple levels.

Popular culture is also significant because it is so pervasive. As we have already discussed, popular culture is everywhere. It is in our homes, our communities, our workplaces, and our social clubs. In fact, research conducted by the Nielsen Company (2013) reports that the average American home has more television sets than people, and the average American spends at least 20 percent of his or her day watching television in addition to streaming video via social networks. Not only that, we can now watch television nearly any time and place on our computers, laptops, tablets, and smartphones. While I was teaching in Hong Kong in the summer of 2015, for instance, I was able to watch all of my favorite programs via the apps I downloaded on my phone. Because it is impossible to avoid popular culture and it does function rhetorically, becoming educated consumers of it provides us the freedom to choose what and how its messages will influence our beliefs and behaviors.

APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED . . .

Identify as many popular culture signs, artifacts, and texts you have encountered in the past 24 hours as you can. Now identify what belief or behavior each one played a role in reinforcing or shaping for you. Finally, describe at least two meanings being reinforced or shaped in each of them.

CONDUCTING RHETORICAL ANALYSES OF POPULAR CULTURE TEXTS

Examining a popular culture text to effectively reveal covert messages about taken-for-granted beliefs and behaviors is essentially a three-step process of (1) selecting a text and formulating a research question, (2) selecting a rhetorical perspective, and (3) examining the text from that perspective via a process of description, interpretation, and evaluation.

Step 1: Selecting a Text and Formulating a Research Question

The first step in the process of unpacking the underlying messages in popular culture texts is to select a text and formulate a research question. You can do so in one of two ways. You might start with a text. By that, I mean you might watch a program or see an advertisement that piques your curiosity somehow. You may have a hunch that something more is going on than what the surface message is communicating. For example, maybe you enjoy watching a show like *Superstore* (2015–), the NBC sitcom about employees at a "big box" store. On the surface, you like the program because it's funny. It makes you laugh. But maybe you wonder why it's funny. That is, what is it saying about what is normal and abnormal behavior? Who are viewers led to laugh at and why? This is an example of starting with a text.

On the other hand, you might start with a question. Perhaps you wonder what arguments popular sitcoms like *Superstore* propose about appropriate and inappropriate behaviors for men and women in society. When viewers laugh at something a character does or does not do, they do so because it reinforces that behavior as inappropriate or undesirable. So you might decide to examine what beliefs and behaviors the program is actually attempting to reinforce about appropriate and inappropriate roles and rules for men and women. This is an example of starting with a question.

It doesn't matter whether you start with a text or with a question. Ultimately, the goal is the same: to form the research question you will seek to answer in your analysis.

APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED . . .

Consider a television program you enjoy watching. Which characters are portrayed as "normal," and which ones are depicted as "different" in some way? Now identify the characteristics and behaviors of each as they serve to reinforce an ideology about how one ought to and ought not to believe or behave if one wants to be perceived by others as "normal."

Step 2: Selecting a Rhetorical Perspective

Once you have identified a text and formulated a research question, you need to select a rhetorical perspective through which to examine it. A **rhetorical perspective** is simply a lens through which you look to magnify the underlying messages that have to do with the question you are asking. I like to compare a rhetorical perspective to a spotlight that has different colored filters on it. If you put the red filter on, everything on the stage has a certain hue. If you put the blue filter on, everything on the stage looks quite different than it did through the red filter. Because each popular culture text sends multiple messages simultaneously, the rhetorical perspective you select helps bring to the forefront the messages you are trying to understand in order to answer your particular research question.

In the chapters that follow, we look at nine different rhetorical perspectives and how you use them to systematically analyze texts. This chapter provides a brief overview of the main

goals of each perspective. The first perspective, the neo-Aristotelian approach, was actually designed to analyze public speeches based on the philosophies of the Greeks and Romans more than 2,000 years ago. The next five perspectives were developed in the 20th century in response to perceived limitations of the neo-Aristotelian approach. These perspectives are: narrative, dramatistic, symbolic convergence, neo-Marxist, and feminist.

Although each of these perspectives is often used to understand how messages conveyed in music, visuals, and media function rhetorically, none of them spell out the unique ways in which music (irrespective of lyrics), visual images, or media communicate. Thus, an additional chapter is devoted specifically to each of them.

Step 3: Examining the Text (Describe and Interpret)

Once you have selected a popular culture text, formulated a research question, and decided upon a rhetorical perspective through which to analyze it, you need to systematically examine the text for the underlying messages it sends. Doing so involves a three-step process of description, interpretation, and evaluation.

First, describe the messages being sent. That is, what taken-for-granted belief, behavior, or social issue does the text address? In the Emmy and Peabody award-winning animated movie, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, for example, might want to focus on the underlying arguments it conveys about men and women in society, or about what society ought to value as important, or about racism, among other things. These issues, beliefs, and behaviors are essentially the ways in which the text operates as a **site of struggle**. That is, the text either reinforces or calls into question some taken-for-granted ideology about "the way things are" or "ought to be." The particular focus you take helps determine the rhetorical perspective you will choose. During this step, then, you describe what the text seems to be saying about the issue, belief, or behavior.

Second, interpret how the messages are being conveyed by applying the tools of a particular rhetorical perspective. In this step, consider individuals who are portrayed as normal, desirable, and appropriate and who are not. Then explain what they look like, what they do and say, how they are treated by others, and so on as each contributes to the argument portrayed regarding the issue you identified as a site of struggle. Thus, in this step, you essentially make a case for your argument with evidence from the text.

As an overview for what is to come in the remaining chapters, let us discuss briefly how each perspective helps identify underlying messages in a given mediated popular culture text. We do so by applying each of them to *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. If you have not seen this animated classic, I encourage you to do so before reading the rest of this chapter.

Neo-Aristotelian Perspective. A **neo-Aristotelian perspective** helps us discover persuasive strategies used by orators and their impact on the audience. We do so by reconstructing the context where the speech occurred (audience expectations) and then examining the message and its influence according to the five classical canons (a.k.a. categories or rules) of rhetoric. These canons are invention (content and argument development), arrangement (organizational structure), style (language choices, sentence composition, tropes and figures), memory (mnemonic devices), and delivery (controlled use of voice and body). In *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, a critic might examine the speech, "That's What

Christmas Is All About Charlie Brown," delivered by Linus. In terms of context, the speech comes toward the end of the program, at a point when Charlie Brown is ready to give up on the commercialism of Christmas. Context is important because the speech serves as a turning point regarding the meaning of Christmas. Considering the canons, the credibility of the speech and of Linus is enhanced when Linus delivers his speech confidently from memory and verbatim from the Christmas story chapter in the Holy Bible (Luke). As such, a critic might conclude that Linus's speech was effective in communicating an alternative message (from commercialism) regarding "what Christmas is all about."

Narrative Perspective. A **narrative perspective** helps us discover the underlying moral of the story—that is, its argument about how we ought to and ought not to believe or behave. Throughout the text, actions and consequences are offered as good reasons to accept the moral as being valid. In *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, whereas the overt or surface message is the answer Linus provides regarding "what Christmas is really about," an underlying moral might be that everything and everyone is beautiful and ought to be treated with respect. In the end, even Charlie Brown and the little tree he picked out are treated kindly.

Dramatistic Perspective. A **dramatistic perspective** helps us determine the underlying motives offered as justification for breaking various *rules for living*, rules regarding how we ought to or ought not to behave. In *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, Charlie Brown breaks a number of rules. Perhaps most significant is when he is asked to buy a fancy pink aluminum Christmas tree but instead brings back a puny real tree. The other children initially reprimand Charlie Brown because he did not follow the rules of commercialism that tend to be associated with the holiday. In the end, viewers accept that he is justified in breaking these rules of commercialism because he was transcending them and following a higher order. Ultimately, he is accepted as being OK because he broke the rules for a justifiable reason. Therefore, through the dramatistic perspective, viewers learn that it is acceptable to break the rules if one is following a higher calling.

Symbolic Convergence Theory Perspective. A **symbolic convergence theory (SCT)** perspective helps reveal the shared reality a particular cultural group uses to make sense of the world around them. The plotline, characters, scene, and sanctioning agents (forces that legitimize behavior) work together to convey a shared ideology. This shared ideology is called a **rhetorical vision**. Groups arrive at a shared rhetorical vision by putting together shared stories among them. These stories might be righteous, social, or pragmatic. Righteous story lines focus on shared concerns about what is "right" and "wrong," "proper" and "improper," "superior" and "inferior," or "moral" and "immoral." Social story lines focus on shared values about friendship, trust, camaraderie, and being humane. Pragmatic visions focus on getting the job done efficiently, practically, simply, and so on. In *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, the children ultimately act humanely as they encircle the tree, hold hands with one another, and sing "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." This social story line reinforces a shared reality or rhetorical vision of the importance of friendship, camaraderie, and being humane.

Neo-Marxist Perspective. A **neo-Marxist perspective** helps reveal who is empowered and who is disempowered in a popular culture text and why. In the purest sense, it has to do with socioeconomic status. That is, it reveals ways in which the text's underlying messages either support or oppose the ideological assumption that those with more money

and material possessions ought to be empowered and those who do not have money ought not to be empowered. The perspective has become broader than that today, though, to include groups associated with race, religion, ethnicity, ability or disability, age, and so on. The neo-Marxist perspective chapter will also explore some of these approaches rooted in critical and cultural studies.

In *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, the ultimate message communicated tends to reinforce the status quo that the more money and stuff you can buy at Christmas, the better. Consider, for example, that Lucy wants real estate; that Sally wants her "fair share," preferably in the form of $10 and $20 bills; that Snoopy wins the contest for the best decorated house; and even that the real Christmas tree ends up being decorated with lots of stuff before it is perceived as beautiful. From a neo-Marxist perspective, one might conclude that the primary message conveyed in *A Charlie Brown Christmas* reinforces the ideological assumption that the more money and material stuff one has, the better.

Feminist Perspectives. **Feminist perspectives** focus on what are proposed as "appropriate" and "desirable" as well as "inappropriate" and "undesirable" roles and rules for men and women (including heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, lesbian, transgender, or queer people). When viewed through a feminist perspective, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* reinforces many negative stereotypes about women. For example, Lucy is aggressive and outspoken. Viewers are led to believe these are behaviors women should not embrace because the other characters don't particularly like Lucy, although they may tolerate her. Snoopy even makes fun of her during one of the rehearsals. Sally wants lots of money for Christmas. The girl with the naturally curly hair is only worried that someone might hurt her beautiful "naturally curly hair."

The Illusion of Life Perspective. The rhetorical nature of music as communication has interested scholars, particularly in sociology, since the 1960s. In the 1970s and 1980s, the rhetorical nature of music gained momentum in the field of communication as well. Since then, a number of theories have been proposed to help us understand how music communicates to and for individuals and groups. One such theory is the illusion of life. The **illusion of life** theory focuses specifically on how lyrics and music function together to persuade (e.g., Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001). The ultimate goal is to determine whether the lyrics (cognitive content) and music (emotional content) are congruent or incongruent and how that relationship shapes the argument. For example, the slow and mellow music of a lullaby combined with lyrics about falling asleep peacefully are congruent. Likewise, the upbeat, fast-paced sounds of a school fight song combined with lyrics about going and fighting and winning the game are congruent. If the lyrics to the lullaby were combined with the music of the school fight song or the lyrics of the fight song were combined with the music of the lullaby, however, they would be incongruent.

Three songs play important roles in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. The first is the song that the children dance to while rehearsing their Christmas play. The fact that it is not a familiar Christmas tune and that it has no words reinforces the idea that people seem to have forgotten the meaning of Christmas. Essentially, the song is incongruent with the message of the Christmas play, which actually contributes to the argument that the meaning of Christmas seems to have been lost. The second song is "Jingle Bells" played by Schroeder. The gradual dumbing down of the tune until it is a one-finger melody to which Lucy exclaims "That's

it!" also reinforces the lack of substance to Christmas celebrations today. Finally, the program ends with all the children singing "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" while forming a circle around Charlie Brown's Christmas tree. As such, this final song is congruent—that is, the lyrics and music reinforce each other in conveying the alternative narrative message regarding the true meaning of Christmas.

Visual Perspectives. Since the mid-1980s, concern has been growing steadily about the influential nature of visual rhetoric on individuals and groups. As a result, a number of visual theories and perspectives have emerged. We will describe several of them later in the text. Here, we focus on how visual pleasure theory can inform an analysis of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. **Visual pleasure theory** focuses on the messages communicated through visual images (e.g., Mulvey, 1989). More specifically, it focuses on messages of **narcissism** (i.e., which characters are portrayed as models whom viewers ought to be like) and anti-models (whom viewers ought not to be like), **fetishism** (pleasure derived from looking openly at an object that is in itself satisfying), and **voyeurism** (the pleasure of looking at someone without them being aware of being looked at).

In *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, Linus constantly carries a blanket around with him. At the outset, the blanket-carrying boy might be perceived as a spectacle (fetishism) in a negative sense, that is, as an anti-model whom viewers ought not to be like (narcissism). By the end of the program, however, his blanket warms the spindly Christmas tree and turns it into something "beautiful," thereby becoming transformed into a spectacle in a positive sense. Because Linus is portrayed as wise beyond his years, he appears to be the role model viewers ought to be like (narcissism). As for the girls, with regard to fetishism, they ought to wear dresses and ought to be perceived as pretty. Because they are portrayed as shallow and catty, narcissistically the message is only about what girls ought not to be like. Although very little occurs in terms of voyeurism, viewers do see Snoopy make fun of Lucy behind her back and laugh. Hence, the message sent seems to be that it is appropriate to make fun of a girl like Lucy behind her back.

Media-Centered Perspectives. A good number of media-centered theories have been developed over the years. These perspectives were developed primarily to study **media effects** (causal and correlation effects of watching a particular television program, viewing an advertisement or series of advertisements, etc.). Elements of them, however, are often used to enhance rhetorical analyses of popular culture texts. We discuss many of them later in the text. Here, we consider how **parasocial relationship theory** can inform our analyses of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (e.g., Bryan & Zillman, 1994; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). Essentially, a **parasocial relationship** is a perception by a viewer of "knowing" a character as in a face-to-face relationship. This relationship develops primarily through rhetorical illusions of **realism** (depicting a version of "everyday life") and **intimacy** (characters are real people with real feelings, norms, and values).

With regard to realism, although no adults ever supervise the children in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, viewers are led to think that is normal. Even when Charlie Brown and Linus get the Christmas tree, they do so alone and at night. In terms of intimacy, although this is an animated program, viewers see the characters as real folks. That is, they say and do things that real kids often say and do (e.g., writing letters to Santa and enjoying seasonal

songs like "Jingle Bells"). Moreover, viewers get to know Linus as a deep thinker and Charlie Brown as someone whose heart is in the right place. Viewers want the other kids to like Charlie Brown and to be nice to him. Even in an animated feature like *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, rhetorical strategies of realism and intimacy encourage the development of parasocial relationships.

Step 4: Evaluating Potential Implications of the Text

Finally, you must evaluate the significance of the argument you make about the text's messages. You do so by considering the various audiences who might view it and how it might influence them to believe and behave as a result. What impact might it have on individuals and groups? Consider the adolescent girls from Fiji mentioned earlier. The evaluation component of the visual images they received about how women ought to look (visual pleasure theory) appeared to have affected their eating habits to the point of a significant increase in disordered eating behaviors. Similarly, some people argue that exposing children to repeated violence on television makes violence appear normal and may, in fact, increase violent behaviors in them. An analysis of violent video games targeted to children might make similar links.

■ **FIGURE 1.1**   Editorial Cartoon

Source: Cartoon "Video Game Violence/School Shooting Influence" by Brian Fairrington.

Based on a narrative perspective of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, we might speculate that people ought to engage in more acts of kindness and charity, rather than mere consumerism, during the holidays. From a dramatistic perspective, we might argue that people ought to have more empathy for those who choose to celebrate the season in different ways. From an SCT theory perspective, we might argue that people ought to treat each other humanely. From a neo-Marxist perspective, we might conclude that parents become aware of the persuasive messages about consumerism their children are exposed to in programs like this one. From a feminist perspective, we might raise the issue that children need to see programs that portray girls in positive ways to counter the messages in programs that portray them only as shallow, self-centered, and sassy. And from an illusion of life perspective, we might argue that children ought to be exposed to Christmas music that reinforces a sense of charity and goodwill rather than just meaningless music that offers only emotional messages composed of musical dance sounds. From a visual pleasure perspective, we might argue that children's programs ought to offer positive messages of narcissism for girls as well as boys. Finally, from a parasocial relationship perspective, we might point out potential implications of children's programs that portray no adult characters, particularly when children are depicted, for example, walking on city sidewalks alone at night.

This cursory look at how one examines the messages embedded in popular culture texts is intended to give you a sense of the big picture. The remaining chapters offer more in-depth explanations of each one and how it works.

SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAY

What follows is a student essay that offers a cursory analysis of the critically acclaimed Stephen Sondheim musical *Into the Woods*, which was adapted from the book by James Lapine and released by Walt Disney Pictures as a feature film in 2014. Although the paper is not perfect (if there even is such a thing), Carol Mikkelson offers a nice example of how one text, in this case *Into the Woods*, often conveys underlying arguments regarding how we ought to believe or behave. Her analysis reveals arguments being made from narrative, dramatistic, neo-Marxist, and feminist perspectives. Notice that Carol begins by piquing the reader's curiosity about what fairy tales "teach" us. She then offers a rationale for examining the musical she selected for analysis. These are important introductory elements in any popular culture criticism.

As you read, consider what Carol offers as (1) the moral of the story from a narrative perspective, (2) justification for breaking society's rules for living from a dramatistic perspective, (3) a rationale for who ought to be empowered and why from a neo-Marxist perspective, and (4) the appropriate roles and rules for men and women from a feminist perspective. Based on the evidence she draws from the text to support her arguments, do you agree or disagree and why?

Into the Woods

Carol Mikkelson

Fairy tales become a part of life's "education" beginning at a very young age. People are exposed to fairy tales in almost every culture. In addition to "Cinderella," some version of which can be found in many cultures, are "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Sleeping Beauty," "Jack and the Beanstalk," and "Snow White," which are probably among the most common. These stories provide entertainment for children and parents alike as the stories are told, embellished, and retold. Indeed, Bruno Bettelheim (1976), author of *Uses of Enchantment*, explains that the experience of literature through the use of fairy tales is important in enriching a child's cultural heritage (p. 4).

Many of these stories have found their way onto the stage in the form of ballet, opera, and musical theatre. In the process, lessons are being taught and learned by both children and adults. Western society, especially, has a fascination with the "happily-ever-after" ending and is often disappointed when modern stories don't come to such a resolution. Because traditional male/female roles are reinforced in those fairy tales, they have become recognizable symbols of expected and approved behavior for the idealized man and woman or prince and princess. The female is portrayed as the beauty, and anything beautiful surely cannot be bad. To be beautiful and well-dressed must certainly mean life is good. By contrast, anything or anyone that is ugly must therefore be evil or at least bad and therefore should (and sometimes must) be destroyed. Beauty is good and ugly is evil. In addition, the male is always "in charge," and the female is always subservient to the male. She may "allow" him to be victorious but never lets him know it. It is only relatively recently that these traditional roles have begun to change. Modern versions of these tales "tweak" the stories just a bit, but many of the old characteristics remain.

Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine have written an immensely popular newer musical version of four such fairy tales, three of which are familiar to most Americans. *Into the Woods* opened on Broadway in 1987 to critical acclaim and lasting appeal to popular culture (Artsedge, 2002). To justify such a statement, it is important to step back and analyze this work from the perspective of four rhetorical theories: narrative, dramatistic, Marxist, and feminist. It is these "lenses" that will sharpen the focus of the critical viewer. Before those views are explored as they pertain to this work, however, it is important to elucidate the background of the authors and the work itself.

Stephen Sondheim has been a writer/composer of merit since he began working in the theatre in 1957 with *West Side Story*. His success continued with such shows as *Gypsy* (1959), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), and *Company* (1970) (Anonymous, 2002). He worked for many

(Continued)

(Continued)

years with the famous Hal Prince and then began working with James Lapine on *Sunday in the Park With George* (1984), for which they received a Pulitzer Prize in 1984 (Sondheim, cover). Numerous other shows complete his continuing list of credits. "Stephen Sondheim's work can be taken as a metaphor for something bigger than musical theatre" (Artsedge, 2002). In an interview with Edwin H. Newman, Sondheim himself does not claim he set out to educate his audiences with this musical, although he does say, "All art is a form of education." It is this "metaphor," however, that becomes apparent in *Into the Woods*.

Although Sondheim contests the assertion by drama critics of his frequent use of metaphor in his texts, there can be no doubt of his use of metaphor in *Into the Woods.* The woods actually become the metaphor for the age-old quest for knowledge and experience. As drama critic Ash DeLorenzo (1988) insists, "Those who expect just one message from Sondheim are expecting too little" (p. 112). Indeed, the text portrays the three stages of pubescence to adolescence in the characters from Red Riding Hood to Jack and then to Cinderella, who gain their knowledge by going "into the woods." Red Riding Hood begins the trek in Act I when she sings:

Into the woods,

It's time to go,

I hate to leave,

I have to, though.

[And]

Into the woods,

And who can tell,

What's waiting on the journey?

(Sondheim & Lapine, 1987, p. 9)

Drama critic Gerald Weales (1988) explains the show as a "standard maturation play in which preoccupation with self gives way to sharing" (p. 19). Life's experiences are often daunting at best, and it is within the woods, where knowledge and those experiences are found, that so many of the darker moments of the text occur.

The story of this musical revolves around four fairy tales that are interwoven: "Cinderella," "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Little Red Riding Hood," and "The Baker and His Wife," which also includes a bit of "Rapunzel" and her mother, the Witch. Typical of Sondheim, the presentation is much like an operetta in that most lines are sung and few are spoken. The stories, which initially are overlapped in the telling, soon become blended into each other, using slapstick humor and witty lyrics to frequently poke fun at society. The music often has odd syncopations and is frequently in varying styles such as "rap." Actually, the rap allows for greater portions of exposition to be shared with the audience, which wouldn't have the patience to listen to it had it been spoken. A prime, although shortened, example can be found in Act I when the Witch explains:

He said, "All right,"

But it wasn't, quite,

'Cause I caught him in the autumn

In my garden one night!

(Sondheim & Lapine, 1987, p. 12)

Act I concludes the way most audience members expect the stories to end: "and happy ever after" (p. 78)! Act II, however, is another story that brings upheaval. Having it all, it turns out, isn't so easy or so much fun. Because it is much darker, we move out of the arena of "light" children's theatre and into that "metaphor" for which Sondheim is known. In this case, it is the woods where some of the characters' wishes are fulfilled.

It would seem that every character has all one could wish for, but such is not the case. Each one wishes for something more. What they wanted so badly in Act I isn't quite what they expected. Then, a new character the audience doesn't actually see, the Giant's Wife, makes her presence known. In her process of looking for Jack, who had stolen from her and caused the death of her husband, she destroys homes, gardens, etc., and more people die: Jack's mother, the Baker's Wife, the narrator, Red Riding Hood's Granny, Rapunzel, and the giant herself. All of a sudden, life drastically changes, and people must work together. Now sadder and wiser, the Witch directly admonishes the audience to be

Careful the things you say,

Children will listen.

Careful the things you do,

Children will see.

And learn. (Sondheim & Lapine, 1987, p. 136)

The characters plan to live and work together one day at a time, being careful, and not necessarily "happily ever after" because life really isn't like that. The argument of this paper is that it is Act II that speaks more to popular culture and makes the musical itself interventionist to a society willing to listen.

In 1988, *Into the Woods* received nine Tony Award nominations resulting in three awards and a Grammy Award for Original Cast Album (Sondheim, cover). It was also "named best musical by both the Drama Desk and the New York Drama Critics Circle" (Artsedge, 2002). It is interesting to note that two of the Tony awards were for Best Book and Best Score, which are the subjects for this discussion (Sondheim, cover). The show continues to be presented by community and high school theatre groups throughout the country. Although its message is not one of total escapism, its appeal to popular culture continues nonetheless. This musical, this text, is already enjoyable, but for a critical viewer, it becomes even more so. The music itself is "catchy," but it is the award-winning book that provides the foundation for the following analysis.

Because so much of this text has characteristics of the four criticisms already previewed, any thorough analysis of *Into the Woods* needs to contain elements of each. It is important to begin with the narrative criticism to establish the genre of this text. In *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*,

(Continued)

(Continued)

Brummett (1994) states: "The characteristics of stories and dramas underlie all symbolic behavior. All texts of popular culture can be viewed in this way, by placing them within a genre" (p. 132). The genre of this text is a dramatic story that contains a moral: Be careful what you wish for. Beginning with the music in the Prologue, each character "wishes" for many things. Cinderella wishes to go to the festival, Jack wishes his cow would give milk, the Baker and his wife wish they had a child, and Jack's mother wishes for a lot of things (Sondheim, p. 4). Those don't seem to be too much to ask for. We almost expect life to turn out like those fairy tales.

We often "wish" our life was like a fairy tale: "If only…" Act I ends predictably, but it is Act II that supports the moral as valid. No one is happy. Cinderella has married the Prince, Jack and his mother are rich, the Baker and his wife have a child, and the Witch is beautiful once again, but no one is happy. Each one wants more. By the end of the act, when seven lives have been lost, each of the characters has reassessed his or her life.

It is the darker side of Act II that has dissatisfied some critics, but Sondheim dismisses "criticisms of the second act, maintaining that audiences do not like to be surprised when watching musicals" (Artsedge, 2002). Although such a statement may be considered harsh, it could also be argued that audiences do not like to think when attending musical theatre. Indeed, the first act fulfills all expectations of the genre, but the second act tends to catch the audience off guard. Remember society's preference for the "happily ever after" ending. The second act and its ending actually hold up a mirror through which we may see ourselves, painful though it may be.

Secondly, this text can be viewed from a Marxist perspective simply because of all the allusions to happiness being equated with economic status, which, as a result, play right into the standards of capitalism. "Marxism is an approach that is concerned with ideology, with class, and with the distribution of power in society" (Brummett, 1994, p. 111). It is that economic base that guides a culture. While Act I of *Into the Woods* begins as a prime example of the subtle lessons taught and reinforced in fairy tales, namely, that beauty, wealth, and position equal happiness, it is Act II that provides the true message: "Things" gained through conquest may not be what is best. The text appears to begin with a blatant preferred message reinforcing the desire for beauty, youth, and wealth; however, by Act II, the message becomes oppositional, subverted as the audience is told point blank: "Careful what you wish for" (Sondheim, p. 136).

From Cinderella's first line in Act I, "I wish…" to the very last line of Act II, also "I wish," the audience sees and hears each character continually fixated on wanting more. These drives follow the characters as they do in most fairy tales and are presented in obvious economic metaphors: Cinderella needs to be married to the handsome, wealthy Prince to be happy, Jack and his mother need gold to be happy, the Witch needs youth and beauty to be happy, the Princes need beautiful, desirable women to be happy, Red Riding Hood needs to satisfy her appetite to be happy. The implication is that those with beauty, youth, and wealth are logically the ones who are empowered, and everyone should strive to

be just like them. Those who are disempowered, like Cinderella and Jack and his mother, seek the empowerment that wealth will guarantee. Act I shows the gullible in the audience that "things" enable one to live happily ever after, but Act II slaps reality back into place.

Almost immediately in Act II, the characters are shown to be "wishing" for more or different things. The "things" or "positions" sure to give each one the kind of power they had wanted so desperately now don't quite "cut it." Cinderella is bored and wishes to sponsor a festival. The Baker's Wife wishes they had more room. Prince Charming, also bored, "dallies" with a variety of ladies, including the Baker's Wife, who is deluded by thinking he is worth it. Add a giant to the scene and life becomes a struggle, but it is exciting once again. By the end of the show, seven characters die and the Marxist lesson slaps the remaining characters in the face: Be careful what you wish for; you may get it.

Although it might appear to be a stretch, there is also validity in examining this text in terms of dramatistic criticism. Burke explains that, when people try to explain their reasons for their actions, they often do so by basing them on what he calls a "Pentad" of five terms: act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose. The audience of *Into the Woods* is presented with such justifications by the characters as they try to rationalize why so many people are dying. Whose "fault" is it? The act is plural because several people have been killed, although not all by the Giant's Wife. The primary agent is the Giant's Wife; the agency is her strength, the scene is the woods, and the purpose is to avenge her husband's death. She exhibits no guilt, but the characters do as they blame each other for being the reason that the giant is killing so many. They each attempt to resolve their guilt through victimage by pointing the finger of blame at everyone but themselves. Because the use of victimage has become so commonplace in today's popular culture, the tendency might be to dismiss this text as merely adding to the list; however, it is the Witch, oddly enough, who sets everyone straight. She shows them that none of them is blameless:

Told a little lie,

Stole a little gold,

Broke a little vow,

Did you?

Had to get your Prince,

Had to get your cow,

Have to get your wish,

Doesn't matter how—

Anyway, it doesn't matter now (script, p. 120) [And]

No, of course what really matters

Is the blame,

Someone you can blame. (Sondheim & Lapine, 1987, p. 12)

The audience members should feel some discomfort if they see a tendency in themselves to behave similarly and transfer any of this chiding to themselves, but they probably won't. Remember, it is the tendency of modern society to use victimage when resolving guilt and blame others.

(Continued)

Finally, *Into the Woods* can be viewed from a feminist perspective. Examining the text from a feminist perspective allows one to understand what are "appropriate" and "inappropriate" roles and rules for women and men. As long as fairy tales have been told, male and female roles have been stereotypically fixed, and children have been raised accordingly. Girls are emotional; they cry and are sweet but are weak and need a male to help them. Males, on the other hand, are not to be emotional and should never cry but always be strong and able to solve whatever difficulty manifests itself. Such characteristics place unfair expectations on both genders in that the lines are so definite. Thankfully, present society now more often encourages females to be strong and males to show emotion but not too much for either one, of course. The characters in this text attempt to fit the new, more liberal view of present-day society; however, traces of the traditional masculine hegemony still shine through.

In Act I, the male/female roles exhibit traditional fairy tale characteristics. Cinderella is on her hands and knees in the kitchen, wishing to "go to the festival" to meet Prince Charming, of course. Rapunzel is stranded in her tower, waiting for someone to rescue her. The Baker's Wife assists her husband in their business but wishes for a child. Even the Witch needs help to become young and beautiful again, but when she does, her magical powers vanish. These women are allowed to show strength but only so much. Each "pulls back" in the face of preexisting male dominance, even though each male is weaker by comparison. Only Red Riding Hood becomes a stronger female, but her strength, by implication, is seen as a negative because she is "too strong." After all, she wears the skin of the wolf and carries a knife. Logic might dictate that, if the female characters are presented traditionally, with only modest enhancement, such would be true for the males, but such is not the case.

Although most of the principal male characters are attractive to the eye, each one displays a weakness. Poor Jack is dull witted and has his "head in a sack," according to his mother (Sondheim, p. 15). True, he is tall and strong, but he has a really light grasp of reality. Because they display almost identical characteristics, the Princes can be characterized together. Each is tall, handsome, and physically fit; however, that is where their "perfection" ends. Also not very bright, each one is incredibly egotistical and only lives for the moment without concern for anyone but himself. As Cinderella's Prince says, "I was raised to be charming, not sincere" (p. 127). The Baker is not very brave, but tries to be by asserting himself. By the end of the musical, he is the only male character who realizes his weaknesses and his wife's strengths, although this happens primarily after her death. Most fairy tales show the male as strong, handsome, fearless, and victorious. The authors of this text have attempted to reflect the change in society's attitude toward the hierarchy of traditional gender roles, yet they have merely reinforced it.

The females are allowed to show strength but not too much. The males fit the traditional fairy tale image of their characters; although they all display obvious weakness, they still maintain a position of power. The females continue to be seen as subservient to the males. In the end, the truly strong females who are still alive, the Witch and Red Riding Hood, are not "rewarded"

with some kind of relationship. It is worth noting that other strong, independent females, like the Baker's Wife, the Giant's Wife, Jack's mother, and Granny, are dead. Perhaps their strength was too much for them? It is doubtful that Sondheim or Lapine intended such debate.

Why, then, should anyone debate this text? What does any of this matter? Because this text is a reflection of popular culture, it matters. Brummett (1994) defines popular culture as "systems or artifacts that most people share and that most people know about" (p. 21). Of course, this text isn't widely known by American culture, but the fairy tales are, and the new twist of their presentation reflects this popular culture, thus becoming of interest. Because of their upbringing, which often involves the telling of fairy tales, Americans generally love stories and enjoy seeing and hearing the old ones retold. Act I, therefore, satisfies that desire. The audience usually laughs at the clever lyrics and can spot the obvious lessons in the moral of the story. Truth be told, there are usually some serious lessons taught in fairy tales, even if it is in reference to what not to do: Stay out of other people's homes. Don't take what doesn't belong to you. Don't be greedy. Don't trust strangers. Don't try to be something you are not. Be careful what you wish for. These kinds of lessons are not hard to find, and audiences don't mind using them indexically as a base for lessons to the young.

When the authors throw in something else, however, the audience becomes impatient, even dissatisfied. Audiences want fairy tales to be happy and end happily ever after. Anything else is regarded as too "grown up" and more within the realm of adults, not children, who are to be protected. At a certain age, however, children need more than the seemingly light "fluff" of fairy tales. Michiko Kakutani, Sondheim biographer, explains that Sondheim and Lapine have created "a vehicle by which to examine some of their own preoccupations: the hold of time past over time present, the responsibilities of adulthood, the necessity of forming connections, the tensions between individual and community" (1988). Children need to know that life isn't a fairy tale. A text such as *Into the Woods* may therefore challenge parents to do some deeper explaining to children.

Some parents can handle those deeper lessons, but many can't. Consider the ethics of some of the characters; a few are not very admirable. Jack steals from the Giant. Red Riding Hood and her Granny kill the Wolf. Cinderella misrepresents herself as a Princess. Cinderella's Prince "fools around." The Baker's Father abandons his family. The Baker's Wife "fools around" with Cinderella's Prince. The Witch keeps Rapunzel in a tower and falsely tells her she is her mother. If a person stops to think about it, these are some pretty disreputable people. Of course, each has a plausible excuse. Yet these particular fairy tales are among the favorites of audiences. With giants and spells, are the stories realistic? No. Even children know these are only stories, but these stories continue to be a part of popular culture in the telling and retelling of them through the ages. If they are so popular and so accepted, can this particular text, especially Act II, be interventionist and serve as a learning tool for audiences? Perhaps, but only if audiences are alert and attentive to the messages.

"Be careful what you wish for" is the most obvious message, but consider the ethics of

(Continued)

the characters. Then, consider the excuses each makes for his or her part in all the deaths. Notice who has power and who doesn't. Finally, examine how males and females are portrayed. Maybe this text is more realistic than first thought. With all these aspects to contemplate, the message becomes darker and heavier, and the alert audience member squirms. Unfortunately, the majority of audience members aren't going to notice all these angles. Only an analysis such as this paper can then be interventionist.

Now this paper isn't going to have more than extremely limited readership. The only way audiences are going to sit up and take notice of the broader implications is by telling them personally. Will it make a difference? Slowly but surely, like the tortoise and the hare. Fairy tales will continue to be told, acted out, sung about, written about, and illustrated in books. Children of all ages will delight in their part of all of it. It is to be hoped, however, that each popular culture of the age will tweak those stories just a bit to make audiences more aware of the broader implications of each.

References

Anonymous. (2002). *Stephen Sondheim: A biography.* Retrieved from http://www.biography.com/people/stephen-sondheim-9488709

Artsedge. (2002). *Celebrating Sondheim.* Retrieved May 24, 2004, from http://www.artsedge.kennedycenter.org

Bettelheim, B. (1976). *Uses of enchantment: The meaning and importance of fairy tales.* New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Brummett, B. (1994). *Rhetoric in popular culture.* New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

DeLorenzo, A. (1988, February). Dark and deep: Sondheim's witty fairy tale about trying to have it all. *Vogue, 178,* 112, & 116.

Kakutani, M. (1988). *Theatre; beyond happily ever after.* Retrieved May 24, 2004, from http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/19/specials/sondheim-happily.html

Sondheim, S., & Lapine, J. (1987). *Into the woods.* New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group.

Sondheim, S., & Lapine, J. (1988). A conversation with Edwin H. Newman. Public television video of *Into the Woods.*

Weales, G. (1988, January 15). Stage tales and dragons: *Into the Woods* and *Nixon in China. Commonwealth,* 18–19.

Summary

In this chapter, we defined popular culture, discussed why popular culture is important to study, and explained very briefly how one goes about conducting a rhetorical analysis of a mediated popular culture text. Popular culture is pervasive, and its arguments about how we ought to and ought not to believe and behave are often covert. By learning to examine these underlying messages embedded beneath the surface, we become educated consumers with the ability to choose whether or not to agree with them. Moreover, as we learn to see these underlying messages, we can begin to educate others to understand them as well. Ultimately, we can manage the persuasive impact of such messages because we will no longer be unaware consumers of them.

Challenge

Now that you have a sense of what popular culture texts are and how they communicate, I challenge you to apply what you have learned to a television program or commercial. Because it is often easier for beginning critics to see the underlying messages in texts from earlier decades, I encourage you to select an episode from a 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s television sitcom (e.g., *Leave It to Beaver*, *I Love Lucy*, *That Girl*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *The Brady Bunch*, *Gilligan's Island*). Then answer the following questions:

1. If a speech is delivered during the program, what is it communicating via a neo-Aristotelian perspective? Be sure to consider context and audience expectations as well as the five classical canons of rhetoric. What implications might such a message have on viewers?

2. What is the program communicating via a narrative perspective? Be sure to provide some examples as good reasons to support the moral you identify. What implications might such a message have on viewers?

3. What is the program communicating via a dramatistic perspective? Be sure to identify what rule for living is being broken and then what is offered to justify breaking it. What implications might such a message have on viewers?

4. What is the program communicating via an SCT perspective? Be sure to identify evidence from the plotline, characters, scenes, and rationales for behavior to support the shared reality communicated in it. What implications might the message have on viewers?

5. What is the program communicating via a neo-Marxist perspective? Be sure to identify the people who are portrayed as being empowered and disempowered and why. What things happen to reinforce that such empowerment and disempowerment is "normal" or "how it ought to be"? What implications might such a message have on viewers?

6. What is the program communicating via a feminist perspective? What are identified as "appropriate" and "inappropriate," "desirable" and "undesirable," or "normal" and "abnormal" roles and rules for men and women? What implications might such a message have on viewers?

7. If music is used, from an illusion of life perspective, are the lyrics and music congruent or incongruent, and how does that affect the message? What implications might such a message have on viewers?

8. What is the program communicating via a visual pleasure theory perspective? Consider narcissism, fetishism, and voyeurism as you seek to find an answer. What implications might such a message have on viewers?

9. What is the program communicating via a parasocial relationship theory perspective? Consider how realism and intimacy enhance the message being communicated. What implications might such a message have on viewers?

Suggested Readings

Kuypers, J. A. (Ed.). (2014). *Purpose, practice, and pedagogy in rhetorical criticism.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Ott, B. L., & Dickinson, G. (Eds.). (2013). *The Routledge reader in rhetorical criticism.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Stoner, M., & Perkins, S. (2016). *Making sense of messages: A critical apprenticeship in rhetorical criticism.* New York, NY: Routledge.

References

Bauder, D. (2016, June 30). Study: We're further addicted to our phones. *Orlando Sentinel*, p. A10.

Becker, A. E., Grinspoon, S. K., Klibanski, A., & Herzog, D. B. (1999). Current concepts: Eating disorders. *New England Journal of Medicine*, *340*, 1092–1098. doi:10.1056/NEJM199904083401407

Brummett, B. (2011). *Rhetoric in popular culture* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Bryan, J., & Zillman, D. (Eds.). (1994). *Media effects: Advances in theory and research*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Byun, S., Ruffini, C., Mills, J. E., Douglas, A. C., Niang, M., Stepchenkova, S., Lee, S. K.,. . . Blanton, M. (2009). Internet addiction: Metasynthesis of 1996–2006 quantitative research. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, *12*(2), 203–207. doi:10.1089/cpb.2008.0102

D'Agata, C. (2008, April 3). Nomophobia: Fear of being without your cell phone. *CBS News.* Retrieved March 22, 2013, from http://web.archive.org/web/20080412042610/http://www.wsbt.com/news/health/17263604.html

Etherington, D. (2012, September 12). iOS app store boasts 700K apps, 90 % downloaded every month. *TechCrunch.* Retrieved March 22, 2013, from http://techcrunch.com/2012/09/12/ios-app-store-boasts-700k-apps-90-downloaded-every-month/

Gartner. (2016). Gartner says worldwide wearable devices sales to grow 18.4 percent in 2016. *Gartner.* Retrieved June 22, 2016, from http://www.gartner.com/newsroom/id/3198018

Gartner, C. P. (2012). Forecast: Media tablets by operating system, worldwide, 2010–2016, 1Q12 update. *Gartner.* Retrieved March 22, 2013, from https://www.gartner.com/login/loginInitAction.do?method = initialize&resume = /idp/resumeSAML20/idp/SSO.ping&spentity = gartnersp

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1994). Growing up with TV: The cultivation perspective. In J. Bryan & D. Zillman (Eds.). *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 17–41). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Harrison, K. (2000). The body electric: Thin-ideal media and eating disorders in adolescents. *Journal of Communication*, *50*(3), 119–143. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2000.tb02856.x

Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, *19*(3), 215–229.

Jaslow, R. (2012, January 12). Internet addiction changes brain similar to cocaine: Study. *CBS News.* Retrieved March 22, 2013, from http://www.cbsnews.com/news/internet-addiction-changes-brain-similar-to-cocaine-study/

Johannesen, R. (1990). *Ethics in human communication* (3rd ed.). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Kung, V. (2012, March 7). Rise of "nomophobia": More people fear loss of mobile contact. *CNN Cable News Network.* Retrieved March 22, 2013, from http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/06/tech/mobile/nomophobia-mobile-addiction

Lunden, I. (2012). Analyst: Twitter passed 500M users in June 2012, 140M of them in US; Jakarta "biggest tweeting" city. *TechCrunch.* Retrieved March 22, 2013, from https://techcrunch.com/2012/07/30/analyst-twitter-passed-500m-users-in-june-2012-140m-of-them-in-us-jakarta-biggest-tweeting-city/

Miniwatts Marketing Group. (2012). *Facebook users in the world: Facebook usage and Facebook growth statistics.* Retrieved March 22, 2013, from http://www.internetworldstats.com/facebook.htm

Mulvey, L. (1989). *Visual and other pleasures.* Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

Neeraj, M. (2015). Global smartphone sales 2015–2017: India will surpass the US. *DazeInfo, Inc.* Retrieved June 22, 2016, from http://dazeinfo.com/2015/07/04/global-smartphone-sales-2015-2017-india-will-surpass-us-report/

Nielsen Company. (2013). The Nielsen March 2013 cross-platform report: Free to move between screens. *The Nielsen Company.* Retrieved from http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/reports/2013/the-nielsen-march-2013-cross-platform-report--free-to-move-betwe.html

Nilsen, T. (1974). *Ethics of speech communication* (2nd ed.). Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.

Parks Associates. (2012). *Mobile services: Global outlook. Parks Associates, 1998–2012.* Retrieved October 25, 2016, from https://www.parksassociates.com/report/mobile-services--global-outlook

Rubin, A. M., & Perse, E. M. (1987). Audience activity and soap opera involvement: A uses and effects investigation. *Human Communication Research*, *14*(2), 246–268. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1987.tb00129.x

Rubin, A. M., Perse, E. M., & Powell, R. A. (1985). Loneliness, parasocial interaction, and local TV news viewing. *Human Communication Research*, *12*(2), 155–180. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1985.tb00071.x

SecureEnvoy. (2012, February 16). 66% of the population suffer from nomophobia the fear of being without their phone. *SecureEnvoy.* Retrieved December 23, 2012, from http://www.securenvoy.com/blog/2012/02/16/66-of-the-population-suffer-from-nomophobia-the-fear-of-being-without-their-phone/

Sellnow, D., & Sellnow, T. (2001). The "illusion of life" rhetorical perspective: An integrated approach to the study of music as communication. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *18*(4), 395–415. doi:10.1080/07393180128090

Smith, C. (2016, June 19). By the numbers: 200 surprising Facebook statistics. *Digital Stat Articles.* Retrieved June 22, 2016, from http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/by-the-numbers-17-amazing-facebook-stats

Statistica. (2016). Number of apps available in leading app stores as of June 2016. *Statistica.* Retrieved June 22, 2016 from http://www.statista.com/statistics/276623/number-of-apps-available-in-leading-app-stores/

Thurner, R. (2012, March 29). The latest app download statistics: A breakdown by country of the most popular app download statistics to help make the business case [Web log post]. Retrieved December 21, 2012, from http://www.smartinsights.com/mobile-marketing/app-marketing/app-download-statistics/

Twitter Statistics. (2016). Twitter statistics. *Statistic Brain.* Retrieved June 22, 2016, from http://www.statisticbrain.com/twitter-statistics/

Wallace, K. (1955). An ethical base of communication. *The Speech Teacher*, *4*(1), 1–9. doi:10.1080/03634525509376710

Chapter 2

Expanding the Rhetorical Tradition

I n Chapter 1, we discussed definitions of *culture*, *popular culture*, and *popular culture texts*, as well as *mediated popular culture* and *mediated popular culture texts* as they are used in this book. We also explained why popular culture is important and how to examine popular culture texts through a process of describing, interpreting, and evaluating. This chapter focuses on rhetoric and its evolution over the years. We begin with a discussion of the nature and definitions of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism. We then explore the roots of the rhetorical tradition, as well as how and why rhetoric evolved to include popular culture texts. Finally, we describe the first rhetorical criticism method created to distinguish the analysis of speeches from literary criticism and we offer a sample student essay using this neo-Aristotelian approach.

THE NATURE OF RHETORIC AND RHETORICAL CRITICISM

For many of us, the word *rhetoric* conjures up negative connotations. Sometimes, for example, speeches by politicians are criticized as being "nothing but a bunch of rhetoric," inferring that they (1) lack any meaningful substance, (2) are filled with lies offered merely to placate the public, or (3) use metaphors and figures of speech as a means by which to avoid addressing the issues. These interpretations of the word *rhetoric* are not what we are talking about in this book. Rather, as defined in Chapter 1, rhetoric has to do with the ways

in which signs influence people. That is, rhetoric is persuasive communication. Let's look now at each element of rhetoric in more detail.

APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED . . .

Identify a time when you dismissed a speech by a public official as "meaningless rhetoric." What did he or she say or do that led you to that conclusion?

First, rhetoric is accomplished through signs. As defined in Chapter 1, a *sign* in rhetorical terms is something that makes you think of something else. More specifically, because every sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell has the potential to prompt us to think about something else, everything has the potential to be a sign. This distinction is important because some of the earlier definitions of rhetoric were limited only to words. Scholars would study, for example, the transcripts of speeches and how words were used to influence audiences. The contemporary definition of rhetoric we use in this book certainly acknowledges the persuasive potential of words but not at the exclusion of other kinds of signs.

Signs can influence us in a number of ways. Sometimes we think of something else because the sign resembles something else. For example, when actors play the role of a real person—as Morgan Freeman did in portraying Nelson Mandela in the film *Invictus*, as Meryl Streep did in portraying Julia Child in *Julie and Julia* and Margaret Thatcher in *Iron Lady*, and as Daniel Day-Lewis did in portraying Abraham Lincoln and Sally Field did in portraying Mary Todd Lincoln in *Lincoln*—their success or failure rests in many ways with their ability to resemble the person in as many ways as possible. Likewise, the success or failure of comic strips such as *Dilbert* or *Dennis the Menace* or adult cartoons such as *Family Guy*, *Archer*, or *The Simpsons* often rests on the characters' resembling our perceptions of real-life coworkers, employers, kids, parents, and neighbors. In these cases, we say the sign functions iconically. In other words, it functions as an icon, which is a symbol of the thing (in this case, the person) it represents.

QUESTIONING YOUR ETHICS . . .

Sometimes celebrities achieve success because they make themselves look like or act like someone else. Consider, for example, Elvis impersonators or Madonna, who got her start by resembling Marilyn Monroe. Do you think this strategy is ethical? Why or why not?

Sometimes a sign leads us to think of something else because we associate the sign with another thing. For example, some people have a difficult time thinking of Madonna as a mother and an author of children's books because they associate her so strongly with a

sexual pop music diva. Conversely, some argue that actor Anthony Perkins had a difficult time securing movie roles after starring in *Psycho* because he was so believable as psycho killer Norman Bates that viewers could not disassociate him from that character. Some argue that Sylvester Stallone (Rocky) suffered a similar plight. Interestingly, upon learning that I lived in Fargo, many people often associated me with the stereotypes portrayed in the film *Fargo*. They expected my sentences to be filled with "yeah sure" and "ya betcha," and they sometimes even asked me what it was like to live on a "tundra." In fact, the concierge at a hotel where I stayed in Paris even asked me if I had seen "the film by the brothers Coen" after seeing my home address on my driver's license at the time. In these cases, we say the sign functions **indexically**, that is, associated with something else.

Applying What You've Learned . . .

Identify a popular musician you know who has either successfully or unsuccessfully crossed over from one genre to another. What role do you think his or her indexical association played in the result?

Sometimes a sign leads members of an identifiable group to think of something else merely by conventional agreement. Signs that function in this way operate **symbolically**. In other words, a group comes to mutually agree on the meaning of the sign by custom or habit. Slang often functions in this way. Consider the word *wicked*, which dictionaries define as evil and mean but that can mean quite the opposite in some cultural groups (Rader, 1996–2016). Computer and Internet jargon are also examples of signs that function symbolically. For instance, we "google" to find answers to questions, we "Facebook stalk" when we peruse postings without commenting, and we "binge watch" multiple episodes of television programs on Netflix. These meanings are often arrived at by conventional agreement among users. Many product brands function symbolically using visual images or musical sounds (e.g., visuals such as Nike's swoosh and Apple's apple and musical jingles such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola's). Colors can also operate symbolically when meaning is attached to them arbitrarily by conventional agreement among group members (e.g., blue is for boys, and pink is for girls). Interestingly, the way in which signs function symbolically often results in miscommunication across cultures because these definitions do not always translate. For example, the color used to symbolize a severe weather warning in the United States is red; however, black is used for such alerts about dangerous torrential rainstorms in Hong Kong. This is particularly true with nonverbal body language (e.g., gestures, eye contact). For example, the hand symbol used in the United States for "OK" has an obscene sexual meaning in some European countries, means "worthless" in France, is a symbol for money in Japan, and stands for "I'll kill you" in Tunisia (Axtell, 1998).

So, signs can make us think of something else iconically, indexically, or symbolically. When they do so, they have the potential to influence us to believe and behave in certain ways. Recall from Chapter 1 that, when we study rhetoric—in this case, popular culture

texts as rhetoric—we are concerned with signs that function as artifacts (i.e., a sign or series of signs that is socially grounded). In other words, the meaning of signs as artifacts is widely shared by some identifiable cultural group. Hence, an artifact worthy of rhetorical analysis is one that offers many signs contributing to a unified message or argument about the way things ought to or ought not to be. For example, although the song "Can't Help Falling in Love" by Elvis Presley functions as a sign for me personally because I associate it with my wedding day, it doesn't function as an artifact in this way. It might function as an artifact (with a meaning that is shared by an identifiable group), however, in terms of its message of believing in unrequited love or soul mates. In this way, the song as an artifact could serve as a popular culture text worthy of rhetorical analysis.

Second, rhetoric implies attitude or behavior change. In other words, we must do something with the signs we encounter. What we do might be mental (i.e., reinforcing or altering an attitude, belief, or value) or physical (i.e., continuing to behave in a certain way or changing behavior). In other words, we ask, what do the signs mean, and how does that meaning influence my ideology about "the way things are" or "the way things ought to be." For example, a biology professor once told me that students "learn" more about DNA from television programs like *CSI* than in her classroom lectures, regardless of whether the information on *CSI* is, in fact, accurate. For her students, the signs in the mediated popular culture text (*CSI*) communicate as artifacts to influence what they believe about DNA. Reality television programs like *Jersey Shore*, *Little People*, *Real Housewives*, and *Big World*, which are presented as unscripted stories of ordinary people going about their daily lives, are also examples of mediated popular culture texts offering an ideology about "the way things are." When it debuted in 2006, the academy-award winning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* attempted to influence viewers about "the way things are" with regard to global warming. The message it conveyed spurred a great deal controversy at the time, but today, the film is credited by many for raising international awareness about climate change and is actually shown in many school science classes. Multiple award-winning, American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift's autobiographically based songs attempt to influence listeners about "the way things are and ought to be" regarding relationships. And makeover programs like *Fit for Fashion*, *Extreme Makeover*, and *The Biggest Loser* attempt to influence viewers about "the way things both ought to and can be" regarding self-image.

The goal of this book is to provide you with tools you need to examine the signs offered as artifacts in popular culture texts that might influence your ideology about "the way things are" or "the way things ought to be." This analytical process is referred to as *rhetorical criticism*. Note that rhetorical criticism is not merely the process of pointing out all the flaws in a popular culture text, which we might assume if we think of the common use of the word *criticism*. Rather, rhetorical criticism is the systematic analysis of an argument about "what things are" or "the way things ought to be" conveyed in a text through signs as artifacts. Recall that our focus in this book is on mediated popular culture texts (i.e., a subset of the broader range of popular culture texts, which is limited to media such as movies, music, television programs, etc.). Hence, we are concerned with how mediated popular culture texts function rhetorically. To do so, we must draw on what is known about rhetorical criticism and its roots in the rhetorical tradition.

EVOLUTION OF THE RHETORICAL TRADITION

Rhetoric has a long and rich history throughout the world (Sloane, 2001). The roots of rhetoric in Western civilizations (including the United States) can be traced to the fifth century B.C.E. in the ancient city-states of Greece. Thus, we begin our historical accounting there.

Classical Period

The classical period, also known as the Golden Age, began in the fifth century B.C.E. and lasted until the Middle Ages (Sloane, 2001). The bulk of rhetorical study and practice took place in Greece and Rome, and Athens was the focal point for advancing democracy and liberal arts through rhetoric. The earliest philosophers defined rhetoric as *peithō technē logōn*, which means the art of persuasive speaking (p. 94).

This emphasis on public speaking (a.k.a. oratory, public address) arose from a felt need for responsible civic engagement. To clarify, because Greece was a practicing democracy, citizens needed to engage in self-governance for it to persist and flourish. Self-governance decision making was limited, however, to free, adult, native-born, property-owning males.

■ **FIGURE 2.1** Public Speaking Forum in the Classical Era

Source: ©iStockphoto.com/ZU_09.

These male citizens were required to participate in public forums in order to conduct business, debate issues, make public decisions, as well as gain and maintain power. Doing so required them to address large groups of people at once. Because written discourse could not be mass-produced and distributed (the printing press had not yet been invented), the means by which to exchange such information was through public speeches. Hence, competent public speaking skills were crucial for both individuals and the government to survive and thrive (Golden, Berquist, Coleman, & Sproule, 2011).

Because public speaking skills were in high demand, a market for public speaking teachers arose. A group of professional public speaking experts known as **Sophists** emerged to meet the demand. Sophists would travel from place to place and teach public speaking skills to wealthy Greek men for a fee. Teaching public speaking skills to citizens so they could engage effectively in public forums was a laudable goal and, quite frankly, continues to be a primary reason for including public speaking courses in general education programs today. However, many classical rhetoricians of the day agreed with Plato, who took issue with what the Sophists were doing.

Plato articulated reasons for rebuking the Sophists in his two seminal works, *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*. First, he argued that the Sophists claimed to be experts but were not. Second, and somewhat more disconcerting, he contended that what the Sophists actually taught was to persuade regardless of (a) the subject matter topic, (b) the truth of their claims, (c) the substance of their content, or (d) the logic of their reasoning. In other words, Plato claimed that Sophists taught structure and delivery techniques without attention to substance. Frankly, some argue that many public speaking teachers today continue to practice such sophistry. For Plato, however, to do so was to deceive the public and would ultimately lead to flawed decision making and destructive consequences. Plato and his colleagues believed that orators were morally obligated to "know the truth and understand logical reasoning and human psychology" and then to lead people to understand the truth through public speeches (Sloane, 2001, p. 98). Because Sophists did not educate themselves first about the subject matter and use that as the rationale for engaging in public speaking, Plato argued they were teaching people to manipulate others through "flattery and deceit" (p. 98).

Plato offered a thorough critique of sophistry and its flaws; however, his student Aristotle actually provided the grounding for rhetoric that still guides our understanding of public speaking today. In his famous treatise, *Rhetoric* (trans. 1954), Aristotle defines *rhetoric* as the power of "observing in any given case [on almost any subject] the available means of persuasion," that is, examining the ways in which texts (i.e., public speeches) influence people (Solmsen, 1954, p. 24). In Books 1 and 2, he explains how effective speakers develop content, which was later termed *invention*. He describes the means of developing persuasive content as **nonartistic proofs** (support appeals not invented by the speaker) and **artistic proofs** (rhetorical appeals invented by the speaker). The three forms of artistic proofs are **ethos** (perceived speaker credibility, competence, and character), **pathos** (emotions stirred in the audience by the speaker), and **logos** (logical arguments based on evidence and reasoning).

Much later (during the first century B.C.E.), a great Roman orator, philosopher, and politician named Cicero and his contemporary Quintilian extended Aristotle's teachings on rhetoric to develop a theory of speaking based on five **canons** (or rules). Some of the most