

DEBRA L. MERSKIN



# MEDIA, MINORITIES, AND MEANING

*A Critical Introduction*



**PETER LANG**  
CLASSICS

This book is an examination of how American mass media, including advertising, presents Otherness—anyone or anything constructed as different from an established norm—in terms of gender, race, sex, disabilities, and other markers of difference. Using a mythological lens, the book looks below the surface of media content to explore the psychological, social, and economic underpinnings of a system of beliefs that results in prejudice, discrimination, and oppression. Designed to raise awareness of the foundations of historically-based inequities in the American social, cultural, and economic milieu, the author shows how inequalities are maintained, at least in part, by mass media, popular culture, and advertising representations of Otherness. The book aims to increase awareness of stereotyping in the media, and expose how the construction of people as Others contributes to their marginalization. Written in an accessible and engaging style, with student-friendly discussion questions and resources, this book is suitable for upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses.

“A welcome addition to a crucial area of media literacy activism! With her intriguing basis in myth and focus on Otherness, Debra Merskin presents an exciting, novel approach to her grounded critical analyses of media portrayals of minorities, and her engaging balance of scholarly style and conversational manner offers students and professors a genuine textbook that is accessible and relevant.”

—*Mary-Lou Galician, Head of Media Analysis & Criticism,  
Walter Cronkite School of Journalism & Mass Communication,  
Arizona State University*

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*We don't see things as they are,  
we see things as we are.*

Anaïs Nin

To Myszka, Nib, Wicker, Luna, Sweet Pea, and Douglas.  
Above all to Don and Virgie, who did the best they could with what they had.  
I love you all.



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## Preface

*What are stories if not the container of culture, the body, and its inner worlds? Myth encompasses many elements; the human and divine, the history of a people, their thought, their way of being, the terrain in which they live.*

Linda Hogan

Twelfth-century Sufi mystic poet Rumi (1207–1273) tells the story of an elephant that invites us to explore how human beings come to perceive, conceptualize, and define “reality.” Roughly translated the story goes something like this:

Some Hindus were exhibiting an elephant in a dark room, and many people collected to see it. But as the place was too dark to permit them to see the elephant, they all felt it with their hands, to gain an idea of what it was like. One felt its trunk, and declared that the beast resembled a water pipe; another felt its ear, and said it must be a large fan; another its leg, and thought it must be a pillar; another felt its back, and declared the beast must be like a great throne. According to the part which each felt, he gave a different description of the animal. (1993, p. 208)

In the United States, the proverbial elephant is in the living room. Everyone knows it is there, but few are willing to acknowledge it in its full scope—the racism, sexism, ageism, and other “isms” that continue to permeate our culture, society, and psyches. Many of us feel those parts that most resonate with our own experiences. Others have had the experience of being defined only by one aspect of themselves—appearance, voice, mannerisms, origin, or perhaps by skin color. Rumi’s tale is a reminder of the importance of asking questions and examining

our preconceptions. It invites exploration of unfamiliar terrain and encourages us to be open to different experiences. In a similar fashion, this book proceeds in a grass-roots manner: from the bottom up, rather than the top down. Problems associated with racism, sexism, ageism, and other “isms” clearly exist, are persistent, consistent, and corroborated in many forms of mass media and popular culture. Each deserves examination, but first we need to understand the historical, psychological, cultural, sociological, economic, and political circumstances that contribute to the maintenance of the status quo in mainstream society—the core of the elephant.

In this book, I examine historical and cultural narratives underlying mass media and advertising sustained stereotypes and/or mis-representations of women, people of color, and other minorities.<sup>1</sup>

For more than a century, the mass media have been America’s primary tellers of tales. Along with education, government, religion, and the family, the mass media comprise a major social institution and locus of learning. The messages the media deliver to us are at least, if not more, influential than other sources of institutionalized learning. Books, newspapers, and magazines, and electronic sources such as television, radio, music, and the Internet, provide the news, information, and entertainment that contribute to our understanding of the world around us.

As early as 1922, journalist Walter Lippmann pointed out how the media are skilled in constructing pictures in our heads, which support the status quo as opposed to an external, experiential reality. Today, individuals form impressions of themselves and of others, particularly those whom they have not met in person, largely based on what “the box,” the “silver screen,” and other mass media show, making the media some of the most powerful arbiters of racial, ethnic, and gender identity and inequity. Rather than drawing on first-hand personal experience for shared cultural definitions of who is one of “Us” and who becomes one of “Them,” Americans are largely dependent on the kind of second-hand knowledge the media deliver. For example, stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans as savage sports mascots largely go unquestioned. If someone raises ethical questions he or she is often dismissed as being “too P.C.” (politically correct).

In order to understand how many of these representations and media-defined relationships have come to seem normal, natural, and unremarkable to many of us, I begin by looking below the surface of media content and explore the psychological, social, and economic underpinnings of our system of beliefs (ideology). In America, the ideology of an elite is one that not only permits the continued existence of dehumanizing portrayals but also participates in their construction and



maintenance. Similarly, the *lack* of representations (symbolic annihilation) of particular groups of people speaks as loudly as images and words.

Why, as a society, are we inclined to accept media messages as truth? In the United States, which is the focus of this book's examples, the mass media reflect stereotypical beliefs about people, places, and things that have their foundation in the pre-mass-mediated past. From pictograms on cave walls to pixels on computer screens, human communication efforts display a "truth," a "reality," and a "world view" which become the voice and vision of a society reflected in its recorded words and images. In Western society, the beneficiaries of the power and resources, those who author and/or legitimize these expressions, have been and continue to be White, male, heterosexual, and middle class. One only has to look at the captains of media industry to see the faces of patriarchal power: Michael Eisner (Disney, until 2005; replaced by Robert Iger), Sumner Redstone (Viacom), Jean-Bernard Lévy (Vivendi Universal), Jeffrey R. Immelt (GE/owns NBC), and Rupert Murdoch (News Corp.)

This book begins with an exploration of cognitive and analytic psychological explanations for questions such as: Why do we stereotype? What functions do stereotypes serve? What harm is there in stereotyping? These views provide tools for exploring questions of why human beings categorize and stereotype and what purpose this kind of thinking serves. Understanding the function of stereotypes comes by way of the ideas of Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Emile Durkheim, Erving Goffman and others, along with several media effects theories such as cultivation, media dependency, social learning, and accumulation theory. Other than the obvious impact on self-esteem, belonging, and community, stereotypes de-legitimize groups of people in the minds and eyes of those who hold power and access to resources. Perceptions of difference thought of in this way impact public policy decisions, economic outcomes, and access to medical care, education, employment, and legal representation. Through examples, my goal is to work toward undoing some of the basic psychological programming that continues to fuel the fires of discrimination in American society and to encourage readers to become activists in making changes to the ways people are presented in advertising, television programs, magazines, and other media.

Once upon a time, children learned morals, rules, attitudes, and behaviors from their parents and elders. Lessons about morality, religious, and social beliefs, and other protocols for coexistence were largely taught through stories, which were and are effective means of communicating important information to children. If, for example, the behavioral lesson for children is not to go into the world alone (where danger lurks) without a parent's permission, the story inevitably includes brushes with death and frightening creatures, stories about what happens when

little boys and girls disobey their parents (think about the silenced Ariel in Disney's *Little Mermaid*). Similarly, morality tales stress conformity to a culture's beliefs about sex, love, romance, and appropriate partners. These tales hold as much truth and cultural weight as do Native American tales of Trickster Coyote's adventures, ghost stories told over a campfire, or film portrayals.

Memorabilia, sheet music, movie posters, brand images, jokes, television, film, news, radio, and the Internet create a seemingly seamless flow of ideas about people, places, and things that take on an aura of truth, of naturalness. Stereotypically loaded information remains current in ways that, drawing upon Goffman (1979), should prompt us to ask, "Why don't these words and images seem strange to us?"

While perceptions and beliefs shift and change over time, old views never completely disappear. These "master narratives" are simply transformed into culturally relevant tales that have the weight of policy behind them (Lyotard, 1984, p. xii). For example, while the Latino Frito Bandito stereotype is no longer visibly with us, he continues to live in the collective unconscious. Modern representations have transformed him into the inner city gang member or renegade border crosser, as shown in films, in books, in the news, and on television. According to the stereotype, he is as violent as ever, still of low social class, lazy, and less intelligent than the majority non-Hispanic White audience. These mutually reinforcing stereotypes have deep and ancient roots that remain fertile should the right circumstances arise to reenlist their service. Before the tragedy of September 11, 2001, for example, an evil Arab stereotype was already in place, based on decades of action adventure movie Arab bad guys, constructed and available to those in power. For more than 50 years, movies, cartoons, and news stories told of the monolithic Arab terrorist (see Chapter 6 for more on this topic). Therefore, when the enemy was defined as "those of Arab descent," it seemed a natural and normal conceptualization.

How can we interrupt the flow of (dis)information and (mis)representation? What can you and I do to change the enduring, dehumanizing stereotypes in the media and replace them with rich, diverse, and complex representations? How can we, as Stuart Hall advocates, contest and interrogate stereotypes in order to make them uninhabitable? This book is a step in that direction. It joins the voices of other books that appeal to all of us, some as students, media professionals, educators, legislators, and all of us always as consumers of media products, that change is needed in attitudes that underlie the perpetuation of beliefs and hence representations that present non-majority individuals as "lesser than." Why? Simply because it is the right, the honorable, the ethical thing to do. Awareness of the constitutive nature of stereotypes, of their psychological, cultural, historical, and economic origins, creates the condition in which their meaning need not be fixed.

Books such as this one and courses about the (mis)representation of women, people of color, and other marginalized people, will pave the way for change and be the impetus for activism. The next generation, our students, are where the fire of hope burns. A lofty goal? Yes. But one by one, student by student, *you*, can make a difference in the way media messages are created and consumed.

The first four chapters of this book establish the foundation for thinking about why and how stereotyping seems to be a natural and nearly seamless process in human consciousness. In Chapter 1, I present a model for understanding the power media have in maintaining and perpetuating stereotypes, one that begins with storytelling and myth. This chapter calls for a renewal of the definition of myth, not as lies but as culturally specific truths about concepts greater than ourselves. In this chapter we consider the place of myth in traditional and modern life, see how storytelling is a central part of human consciousness and creative thought, and look at how people come to “know” something is “true” (epistemology). Chapter 2 is a psychological exploration of questions of meaning—and how difference is constructed based on racial, ethnic, sexual, and other differences (isms). This chapter connects meaning with the human psychological tendency to categorize and provides fundamental definitions for terms that appear throughout the book. The goal is to deconstruct the impulse to “Other” so we can learn to interrupt and thereby stop repeating past responses which have led to harm throughout millennia.

Once we understand the psychological processes behind categorizing others it becomes easier to understand and interpret problematic media representations and suggest ways of improving them. Chapter 3 examines the major articulations of “Otherness” in the mass media, the role of stereotypical representations in perpetuating and maintaining differences between a social and psychological construction of who is one of “Us” and who is one of “Them,” and theories of media effects. Chapter 4 describes how differences are articulated in American society. It includes a discussion of the major divisions according to class, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

Illustrative case studies of media representations of particular groups of people based on constructed differences (race, ethnicity, gender, ableness, and combinations of these qualities and characteristics) comprise Chapters 4 through 13. These chapters apply theory to practice. Finally, the book offers resources (Internet sites, films and documentaries, and readings) as part of a vision of what you and I can do, as educators, students, citizens, consumers, and human beings, to interrupt the flow of limiting words and images to create a better world. Key terms, which are listed at the end of each chapter, are highlighted in bold.

**Endnote**

- 1 The term “minorities” is used as a way of describing individuals who hold the minority of power in a society. This is not a numerical designation. Also used in this book is the expression “people of color.” Given that every individual has a preferred way of being referred to, for example, African American and Black or Native American and Indian, these designations will be used interchangeably as a way of respecting preferences.

Images referred to in Chapter 9 are available online at <http://mediaminoritiesandmeaning.wordpress.com>



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Thank you as well to Mary Savigar at Peter Lang for believing in this project. This book represents more than the years it took writing it and even the years spent teaching about these issues. It represents the sorting out and questioning that began within me as a child who wondered why certain people were treated differently than others, why it seemed ok for one group to denigrate another in images and in words, and knowing what it feels like to be an outsider. Although I didn’t know her long, I’d like to acknowledge the influence of my mother, a woman who felt the constraints of many wires of the metaphorical birdcage in terms of her ability to fully comprehend, have access to, and be a part of the world. She was an uneducated, Southern, Native American, whose beauty, wisdom, and sophistication propelled me into questioning what labels mean. Grateful acknowledgement is hereby made to copyright holders for permission to use copyrighted materials: University of Georgia, Department of Entomology, Library and Archives Canada, photographer Donald Schneider, The John Hay Library, Brown University, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, the National Park Service, Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, and Festival Internacional de Cine en Guadalajara.





*Not every certainty is worth preserving.*  
David Berreby





SECTION I:

# **Foundations**



## CHAPTER ONE



# Introduction

*We are like sculptors, constantly carving out of others the image we long for, need, love or desire, often against reality, against their benefit, and always, in the end, a disappointment, because it does not fit them.*

Anaïs Nin

*Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.*

John Berger

*There are many truths. If you happen upon one, it may be comforting. But don't dwell too long there, or you will miss the next truth, which will be equally important.*

Thomas Moore

*All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts.*

William Shakespeare

The purpose of this book is to analyze how American mass media, including advertising, presents Otherness (anyone or anything constructed as different from an established norm) in terms of gender, race, sex, disabilities, and other markers of difference. I have two primary goals for this book: (1) to offer it as a consciousness-raising tool by revealing the foundations of historically based inequities in the American social, cultural, and economic milieu that are maintained, at least in part, by mass media, popular culture and advertising representations of Otherness, and (2) to increase awareness of stereotyping in the media by, as expressed by John Berger (1977), learning ways of seeing how people are constructed as Others and how their marginalization becomes normalized in our media environment. The underlying premise is that the mass media are powerful sources of learning that have assumed the position of a dominant social institution in American society (joining education, religion, family, and government). These communication outlets are effective means of creating, sustaining, and perpetuating limited and limiting representations of people, places, and things through the retelling of **myths**, defined as the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

A **cultural studies** approach guides readers toward an understanding of the roots of stereotype formation and the role mass media play in constructing, reinforcing, perpetuating, and maintaining stereotypes. This is accomplished by describing the context (psychological, historical, economic) within which limited and limiting thinking about others arises. A cognitive developmental foundation is constructed upon those fundamental issues of human understandings of identity, power, and the symbolic mechanisms through which learning and meaning making take place. This book positions the mass media as modern storytellers that serve as conduits to the human psyche, or in the words of psychologist Carl Jung (1974, p. 122), the “**collective unconscious**.” The collective unconscious contains “the entire psychic heritage” of human beings, and its existence is most visible in our dreams, in the symbols we use to express meaning, and universally in timeless stories and fairy tales (Stevens, 1994, p. 23). This perspective is important as what we regard as **stereotypes** (overgeneralizations that treat all members of a group as the same) and stereotypical portrayals in fact, developed from fundamental psychological constructs, germinated in myths. These narratives are peopled by recognizable **archetypes** (multi-dimensional timeless figures) that become concretized in stereotypes (one-dimensional limited representations), limiting their meaning and interpretation. Continually recycled, stereotypes generate ideological rewards that are financially reaped by the owners of mass media corporations in a system, such as that in the United States, of concentrated ownership.

This chapter introduces basic ideas about the historically grounded symbolic power of mass media, the media’s relationship with society, and individual process-



ing of media information about self and others. To begin, I'll tell a story once told to me.

## The World Outside versus the Pictures in Our Heads

In October 1914, on an island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean lived a few English, French, and German people. Back then, no telegraph or telephone lines reached the island and television did not exist. Newspapers and mail arrived only every two to three months. So, in October, the islanders greatly anticipated and excitedly awaited the September delivery, as it would bring word of the verdict in a very exciting trial. It seems in March 1914, on the eve of World War I, Madame Caillaux, wife of a powerful French cabinet minister, had murdered her husband's enemy, *Le Figaro* editor Gaston Calmette. The outcome of her trial would be revealed by this delivery.

When the ship arrived, the people not only learned the verdict of the trial, but also that, during the six-week interim between updates, thousands of miles away in Europe, those who were French and those who were English had been fighting for the sanctity of treaties against those who were German. All this time the islanders had been friends. When word arrived from a world apart from the island, they found out they were now enemies. During the six-week window, the people on the island had conducted their business as usual, it "was a time for each man who [had] adjusted to an environment that no longer existed" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 4). In Europe, as late as July 25, 1914, "men were making goods that they would not be able to ship, buying goods they would not be able to import" (p. 4). Everything had changed, but for a period, the people on this island did not know it. "They trusted the pictures in their heads," not the world outside (p. 4).

Journalist Walter Lippmann wrote this story in 1922, but the lesson is well worth considering today. How do you and I know about events happening and people living in other parts of the world? Mostly by the stories the media tell us. When we hear or read about an event, our mind's eye goes to work drawing a picture based on information we have received in the past, either through others or through our own direct or indirect experiences that may or may not be accurate but become a kind of "truth." Yet, somehow, these pictures in our heads seem as real and informed as if we'd experienced the situation first-hand. Lippmann (1922, p. 29) asked, "Who actually saw, heard, felt, counted, named the thing, about which you have an opinion? Was it the man who told you, or the man who told him, or someone still further removed?" Today, more than ever before, our **knowledge** of people, places, and things comes by way of the mass media, "the world

that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, and out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined” (p. 7).

Those features of the world outside which have to do with the behavior of other human beings, in so far as that behavior crosses ours, is dependent upon us, or is interesting to us, we call roughly public affairs. The pictures inside the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationship, are their public opinions. (Lippmann, 1922, p. 18)

Why are the pictures inside our heads so often distorted? Because of six factors that limit people’s access to facts: artificial censorships, limitations of social contact, limited time, distortions, limited vocabulary, and fear.

1. *Artificial censorships.* This is the selective presentation of facts (verbal or visual) on the part of politicians and the mass media. According to Lippmann (1922, p. 7), “[Man]...has invented ways of seeing what no naked eye could see, of hearing what no ear could hear....He is learning to see with his mind vast portions of the world that he could never see, touch, smell, hear, or remember. Gradually he makes for himself a trustworthy picture inside his head of the world beyond his reach.”
2. *Limitations of social contact.* People tend to socialize with others who are, in some way, like them. Sometimes it is economically based, but often it is ideological—Democrats spend time with Democrats, conservatives know other conservatives, Catholics mingle with other Catholics—not exclusively, but certainly regularly. Typically this behavior results in within-group reinforcement of values, attitudes, and ideals, yielding group solidarity.
3. *Limited time available.* Today we seem always in a hurry—running errands, trying to make it to class or to jobs on time. There is little *time* available to contemplate assumptions or presumptions about those who are somehow different from us.
4. *Distortions.* The bulk of what we know about the world outside comes to us through words and images produced by the media. At every level of telling the information goes through the individual reporter’s internal censors. This is natural, we are subjective beings. What makes sense to one person may or may not to another. What gets reported on and into the media is the result of decisions made by **gatekeepers** (editors, producers) who decide for us what is important. This is called the **agenda-setting function** of the media, telling us what to think about and sometimes what to think about the information we are given.
5. *Limited vocabulary.* A word choice that might be innocuous to one individual might offend another. Journalists and advertisers have tremendous power to fuel perceptions or misperceptions of the world outside. For example, what

comes to mind when you hear the word “immigrant?” As is discussed in Chapter 14, the meaning of the word changed remarkably in 2006 on the National Day of the Immigrant, for example, when thousands of legal and illegal workers demonstrated solidarity. The meaning of the word “terrorist” also shifted after the September 11 disaster, as discussed in Chapter 6. What does the word “freedom” mean to you? Does it mean the same thing to your friends? Family? We have many more ideas than we do words to express them. “Words, like currency, are turned over and over again, to evoke one set of images today, another tomorrow” (Lippmann, 1922, p. 42).

6. *Fear*. Finally, and perhaps most potent and compelling, is the power of fear to motivate and dictate what we hear, see, feel, and do. Allowing new information in, information that might be contradictory to long-held ideas, is risky, it upsets our psychic balance. It takes courage to suspend one’s disbelief, prejudices, or reframe the pictures in our heads in order to consider the views of other people. Fear of the unknown, fear of loss of resources, fear of change are all powerful, if not the most powerful, motivations for the maintenance and perpetuation of limited views of others.

Now the question is, how “this trickle of messages from the outside is affected by the stored up images...preconceptions and prejudices which interpret, fill them out, and in their turn powerfully directly” influence the way we look at and think about others and ourselves?” (Lippmann, 1922, p. 18). The first step toward answering this question is to look to the past and to the process of narratively relaying information as one of the powers of myth, using signs, gestures, and stories.

## Understanding Myth

One of the great intellectuals who thought about how people live in the world, the meanings they make, and the stories they tell was Joseph Campbell (1904–1987). Campbell stood on the shoulders of giants such as philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, analytical psychologist Carl Jung, historian of religion Mircea Eliade, as well perspectives of Native Americans, and the philosophies behind Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism.

Campbell influenced contemporary thinking about how people’s relationships to one another are reflected in a shared and enduring mythological past. He was convinced that human **cultures** share Big Themes about life, love, death, and origins. The stories differ in culturally specific ways, but all societies have them. In 1985, Campbell was awarded the National Arts Club Gold Medal of Honor in Literature. At the ceremony, psychologist James Hillman (1985) stated, “No one

in our century—not Freud, not Thomas Mann, not Lévi-Strauss—has so brought the mythical sense of the world and its **eternal figures** back into our everyday consciousness.”

What is a “mythical sense of the world” and who are “its eternal figures”? Campbell posited what we know, the meaning we give to people, places, and things come from the stories we tell each other and that these stories are continually retold in ways that are relevant to a particular time and place. Paraphrasing the work of Schopenhauer, Campbell notes

The experiences and illuminations of childhood and early youth become in later life the types, standards and patterns of all subsequent knowledge and experience, or as it were, the categories according to which all later things are classified—not always consciously, however. And so it is that in our childhood years the foundation is laid of our later view of the world, and with that, our perception of its superficiality or depth: it will be in later years unfolded and fulfilled, not essentially changed. (as quoted in Walter, n.d.)

Campbell (1988, p. 38) recognized early on the power myths have for structuring reality. He said they perform four crucial functions:

1. *Metaphysical*. A sense of the transcendent, of someone or something greater than the self “out there.”
2. *Cosmological*. An idea of connectedness to a mysterious external reality and that we play an important role in the order of things, real and imagined.
3. *Sociological*. Passing down of the “correct” order of things, the **codes** and rules people need to follow that present a coordinated social order that affirms dominant social structure (see Ideology, p. 13).
4. *Pedagogical*. Myths also teach us about how to be in the world, in relation to individual development and ourselves as well as how to interact with others.

This perspective explains in part modern-day constructions of, for example, masculinity, spawned from fundamental psychological constructs germinated in myths about heroism, courage, strength, and order that are perpetuated in popular culture. Today these might take the form of Bruce Willis action adventure films and might even explain the popularity of the television phenomenon World Wide Wrestling.

Campbell also noted, albeit indirectly, how the social and pedagogical functions of myths not only energize a culture but also how they can be used oppressively and repressively in terms of limiting views of gender, race, class, sexuality, and religion, by turning archetypes (multi-dimensional, fluid symbols of personality) into stereotypes (one-dimensional, concretized signs of Otherness) in ways that made “stereotypes seem archetypal by way of the power and beauty of mythic narrative and image” (Miller, 1995, p. 171). He knew that “mythicizing the arche-

type has given the status quo metaphysical sanction and has supported political atrocity” (as he wrote, for example, about the Chinese view of Tibet) (p. 171). For this reason Campbell (1959, p. 12) cautioned us to use myths carefully and wisely:

Clearly mythology is no toy for children, nor is it a matter of archaic, merely scholarly concern, of no moment to...action.... The world is now far too small, and [the]...stake in sanity too great, for any more of those old games of Chosen Folk...by which tribesmen were sustained against their enemies in the days when the serpent still could talk.

## What Is Myth?

The big stories that shape our lives...are very often those that came to us in our childhood. (McElroy, 2004, p. 12)

A myth, which has been defined in many ways, is a “true” story (Eliade, 1962/1998, p. 1) “woven into a culture which dictates belief, defines ritual, and acts as a chart of the social order” (Malinowski, 1962, p. 249). One of the powers of myth is that people believe in the story (s) they see and hear while growing up, whether or not they are factually provable. Unfortunately, and incorrectly, myth in common parlance has come to mean something untrue, false, fake, or distorted. Instead, the real meaning of myths is they are “not just delightful stories but also...revelations about human nature and human values with human impact” (Galician, 2004, p. 35). French semiologist Roland Barthes (1972) regarded myths not only as classical fables about gods and heroes, but more. Similar to Campbell’s pedagogical functions, myths to Barthes reflect the dominant ideologies of our times and take on the appearance of naturalness, of truth, he notes “the very principle of myth: [is] it transforms history into nature...” (p. 129). “Myth does not deny aspects of [life], on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them. Simply put, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (p. 143).

To any given situation, we each bring our own set of cultural understandings, experiences, and opinions. In this respect the modern Western worldview is every bit as mythological as was the medieval one. A way of thinking about myths is to regard them as ideologies expressed in stories, for example, myth = ideology + narrative. The everydayness of myths can be thought of metaphorically as “the lenses of a pair of glasses in the sense that they are not the things people see when they look at the world, they are the things they see with. Myths are the truths about society that are taken for granted” (Bennett, 1980, p. 167).

Myths are extended metaphors that help us comprehend our experiences in our own culture and apprehend the world around us. They stand in for something or someone else and work as meaning-making tools that help naturalize culture and function as “instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experiences intelligible to ourselves” (Shorer, 1946, p. 355). **Metaphors**, which can be visual or verbal, stand in for something else from which meaning is made, whereas myths are the entire constructed story. Thus, **metaphorical discourse** is the constructed narrative that accompanies the tale which itself might be allusion. Myths are lived extensions of speech from which we make laws, rules, regulations, social relationships, beliefs, and values seem natural and normal, and simply how things are and forever have been. This is accomplished through language, narrative structures, images, and sounds. Words such as “good” and “evil,” emotions such as “hatred” and “vengeance,” and many of our highest ideals for the civilized world are, in part, products of our culture: myths, heroes, legends, and rituals” (Zehnder & Calvert, 2004, p. 123). William Doty (2000, p. 331) observes, “It is striking how many myths reflect societal polarities: rich: poor, servant: king, hero: monster, chaos: order, male: female, older: younger, light: darkness, destructive: constructive, socially approved: socially disapproved, gods: humans.”

In a society with ancient and deep roots into what Jung (1974, p. 221) calls the “collective unconscious,” myths fill the empty containers of authority with information that appears to be natural, normal, and commonsensical. The collective unconscious, while part of the **psyche** (unconscious), “does not...owe its existence to personal experience” (Jung, 1976, p. 59), rather it is a collection of cognitive (thinking), affective (feeling), and behavioral (doing) characteristics passed down to all members of society generation to generation. This kind of unconscious group-thinking is composed of archetypes, or forms that are “present always and everywhere” (Jung, 1936/1976, p. 60). Archetypes are generalized and often idealized versions of human behavior patterns, sometimes positive and sometimes not. While they take many forms, Jung identified four **primary archetypes** (eternal figures) in the human psyche: Self (individual identity), Shadow (usually darker side of personality), Anima (female nature in men), and Animus (male nature in women). These are eternal, archetypal figures found in dreams and stories (myth). They encompass practically all of the characters we find in modern films, television programs, advertising, books, and other media representations. As will become clear in later chapters in this book, the concretization of archetypes forms the foundation for racial and sexual stereotypes which are found consistently in the media and popular culture. Plato called these invisible energies the Eternal “Ideas” (or Forms). The only way we are able to “see” this invisible pattern of the psyche is by way of an intermediary word or image. So-called

“larger-than-life” figures such as heroes and monsters, real or imagined, play important roles. Jung called them “hooks” in story telling. Characters that typically take the form of archetypal figures in art, media, and popular culture include the hero, king/father, great mother, *puer* (eternal boy), child, trickster, and the shadow. An archetypal view assumes that people are influenced by universal instincts that manifest themselves in ways of thinking. Examples of this include the ubiquity of ideas about the creation of human beings, importance of the mother and father in development, and self in relation to society. When re-presented in story form this narrative construction can become naturalized as *the* one and only way to think about someone or something. Archetypes thereby help us make sense out of the world, find answers to questions associated with everyday living, and serve as guides through the complex web of information we are flooded with on a daily basis. There are seven primary archetypes, each fulfilling a specific function in narrative (Voytilla, 1999, p. 13). When you read the descriptions, think about what characters might play these roles in books or news stories you have read or in movies you have seen:

1. Hero—“to serve and sacrifice”
2. Mentor—“to guide”
3. Threshold Guardian—“to test”
4. Herald—“to warn and challenge”
5. Shape shifter—“to question and deceive”
6. Shadow—“to destroy”
7. Trickster—“to disrupt”

For a myth to remain relevant, credible, and viable, people need to believe it accurately reflects present day and, importantly, *their* realities. Today we live in a complicated, interconnected, fast-paced world from which we are always trying to extract meaning, to uncover answers to who we are and where we are going. It is a search for soulfulness, for an understanding of our and others’ cultures and values. While the underpinnings of a myth remain true through time, religious and popular culture portrayals help define, refine, reproduce, and distribute it. Social changes such as women’s movements, civil rights movements as well as technological advancements in media affect a culture’s telling, remembering, and retelling of its stories. Thus, “ancient myths inform (though in disguised form) our arts, our media, and our everyday lives” (Berger, 2004, p. 136). Examples include the ubiquitous romantic belief that there is only one perfect person who will make all our dreams come true. This concretized view of a partner perpetuates not only a search for “the one” but also leads to dissatisfaction in otherwise positive relationships. The myth of “the one” in our everyday lives, the search for the soul mate, is the subject of countless movies, such as the classic *Casablanca* or

contemporary hits such as *Sleepless in Seattle*. While the ancient epic of Gilgamesh was relevant in Sumerian times, it doesn't seem as applicable today in its original form. However, Neo, hero of *The Matrix*, similarly goes out into the world, faces a series of three challenges, and returns somehow changed and the better for it. Other popular examples of the hero motif include Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* and Robin Hood. It is not that the film directors consciously draw on these myths (although they might have), rather the idea of the hero is such a deeply rooted story in the collective unconscious it is continually re-circulated because it makes immediate sense to an audience. These narratives are the familiar structures behind often-repeated versions of a story.

One way of apprehending how this complex process works is to think about an experiment you probably did in your pre-college education. It required three things: a magnet, a piece of cardboard, and some metal shavings. The three-step process goes something like this: (1) put the magnet on a table and place the cardboard on top of it, (2) sprinkle the metal shavings onto the cardboard, and (3) gently blow. What happens? The shavings organize themselves into a series of patterns around the magnet's invisible energy field. Archetypes work this way (although they aren't visible like shavings). Rather, archetypes (inherent predispositions) are unseen psychic, unconscious energy that become visible through images. A constellation of characteristics form a type, with ancient origins that make it familiar and comfortable. Archetypes can manifest themselves in ordinary beliefs, behaviors, and representations of everyday life as expressions of our cultural unconscious. Some characteristics are brought together and re-presented in mediated representations of our lives. If we use film as an example, Tollefson (1998, p. 108) refers to them as “**cinemyths**,” where familiar constructions are revealed through film. Tollefson (1998) identifies three mythological systems operating in new garb in media, all based on the idea of a “Return to the Garden of Eden”:

1. *Biblical version*. This pattern has two patterns—dominant and subversive. This is a “lover's triangle” tale. *Fatal Attraction* is an example of the dominant version in which Glenn Close plays “the other woman” to Michael Douglas as the husband. Close's character Alex is of the type who “lures men away from their wives or steady girlfriends into an intoxicating vortex of sex, secrecy, and violence” (p. 109). This representation of the temptress who controls and sometimes destroys men and their families has ancient origins that can be traced, in Judeo-Christian traditions, to the ancient tale of Adam, Lilith, and Eve. Eve is the good wife who kills the wild demonic interloper. Other film tellings that use this pattern include *Presumed Innocent* and *Dick Tracy*. In the subversion version, “Adam prefers Lilith,” to Eve and is evident in films such as the Sharon Stone and Michael Douglas hit *Basic Instinct*.



2. *Greek version.* This is the fantasy that a woman can be remade or retooled to meet the higher male standard. A classic example is *My Fair Lady* in which Henry Higgins asks, “Why can’t a woman be more like a man?” Other examples include *Children of a Lesser God* and *Educating Rita*.
3. *Garden of Eden with a twist.* This version focuses on the relationship between the women, between Lilith and Eve. In this telling, the Adam figure (whether lawyer, husband, sheriff, or father) is left to work out his issues. The women are intent on healing and growth. Examples of this cinemyth include *The Color Purple*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and *Thelma and Louise*. These gender outlaws often buck the system and travel together (literally or metaphorically) and are liberated through love and respect for each other.

## How do we learn these stories?

Important to studying the presence of myth in media content is the idea that myths are “used to transmit a culture’s basic belief system to a younger generation and to explain natural and supernatural phenomena” (Berger, 2004, p. 181). “Understanding the difference between what is real and what is represented,” says Trbic (2007, p. 87), “is vital to our understanding of any medium.” Myths therefore inform a culture’s ideology through their ability to teach young people the rules and norms of the culture they will participate in. Linguistic and visual markers of myth are found in the codes a dominant social group uses to construct meaning from art, books, and mediated culture. These narratives strike a chord that is consistent with the point of view of dominant society.

**Ideology** is defined as a belief system that, “in order to be effective, must be perceived as the truth, rather than seen as one of many possible belief systems” (Gaffney, 2008, p. 136). Importantly, the truths are established and the meanings are made in ways that appear to be common sense. A more detailed definition says, ideology

is about the “ideas” held in common by social groups in their everyday lives. It also suggests that these ideas are organized in certain ways. An ideology is a “logic of ideas” indicating that the groups who hold various ideologies perceive and understand the world in a certain consistent way. (Thwaites, Davis, & Mules, 2002, p. 158)

This logic of ideas is formed on the individual level and even more so, on the public level. A way of thinking about how ideology works is to think of looking at the world through a pair of special glasses. You might not be aware you are wearing these glasses, but they are constructed in a way so that what you see is framed according to a particular worldview. What you see appears to be the normal and natural way of looking at the world. People often do not recognize they are

acceding to beliefs and values of the dominant system because of the process Stuart Hall (1986, p. 53) calls “articulation.” **Articulation Theory** makes sense out of otherwise, and previously, unrelated concepts. This view conceptualizes the mental moment when people “knit together disparate and apparently contradictory practices, beliefs, and discourses in order to give their world some semblance of meaning and coherence” (Trimbur, 1993). **Hegemony**, defined as ruling of society through the power of ideas versus physical force and where the governed consent to their sublimation, relies on the power of myth. Myths are the frames within which the lenses (ideologies) are contained. These concepts work closely together as psychological (rather than physical) forms of social control.

In French Marxist theorist Ferdinand Althusser’s (1971) view, this is accomplished through **Ideological State Apparatus** (ISA), instruments of power that operate as a force “in ways that are subtle, disguised, and accepted as everyday social practice” (Allison, 1991, p. 195). Althusser (1971) identified two sources of power: Repressive State Apparatus and Ideological State Apparatus. Whereas the first uses physical coercion and/or laws to force compliance with dominant system of beliefs, the second uses ways of thinking, usually through ideas, laws, mores, and rules taught by social institutions such as schools, education, and mass media through an ideological “interpellation” (Althusser, 2001).

The mass media are particularly powerful as they contain a wide variety of symbolic vehicles such as television, film, news, books, magazines, that carry messages consistent with views of the role of women, people of color, and children in society. Essentially, these tools (lenses) reproduce the ideas, values, and beliefs **dominant culture** wants to appear as agreed-upon. A television program (the apparatus) such as *Friends*, for example, presents middle class values, definitions of femininity and masculinity, and, by virtue of the absence of people of color, racial hierarchy.

How we form associations and make meaning is the foundation of mythic thinking. Diarist Anaïs Nin points out at the beginning of this chapter how and what we see, the meanings we ascribe to people, places, and things, depend largely on who we are and how we are raised, that is, our subjective natures: “We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are.” Individual ways of apprehending images, words, and events based upon differences such as nationality, individual experiences, age, race, ethnicity, and sex are components of **subjectivity**, which is

an abstract or general principle that defies our separation into distinct selves and that encourages us to imagine that, or simply helps us to understand why, our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people either as objects of need, desire, and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience. (Mansfield, 2000, p. 3)

The development of individual identity involves learning the “general truths and shared principles” at the intersection of common experience and self, where self is recognized not as a separate and independent entity rather as a part of it, as “one is always subject *to* or *of* something” (*italics orig.*) (Mansfield, 1994, p. 3). Thus we subjectively encounter the world. Repeated exposure to myths, the tenets of ideologies, or mythic motifs instead of intentional conscious learning and actual experience is responsible for embedding these mythic stories into the structure of our consciousnesses. These deep structures influence how we engage with the world around us. They manifest in the modern world not so much as fully formed mythical narratives but rather as “fragmentary references, indirect allusions, watchwords, slogans, visual symbols, echoes in literature, film, songs, public ceremonies, and other forms of everyday situations, often highly condensed and emotionally charged” (Flood, 1996, p. 84).

## How Do We Study Myths?

There are two compatible, interrelated ways to “read” myths as **text**: semiotics and mythological analysis.

### Semiotics

**Semiotics**, based on the Greek word *semēion*, is a useful way of deciphering the coding of cultural myths. This interdisciplinary method draws on fields as diverse as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, literary studies, psychology, and education. A semiotic analysis explores signs and symbols used to articulate myths. Essentially, semiotics is about the meaning people make from the words and images they see. Semiotics helps us **denaturalize** words, symbols, and signs in order to peel off the layer of applied (preferred) meaning that, for example, suggests portraying women as sex objects, African Americans as lazy, or Native Americans as drunkards is a natural and normal reflection of reality.

The theory of semiotics was originally articulated by two primary individuals: Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and American philosopher C. S. Peirce (1839–1914). Saussure’s (1916) *sémiologie* originated in the book *A Course on General Linguistics*. He sought to explain “the role of signs in social life” (1983, p. 15). Saussure made an important distinction between **langue** (language) and **parole** (speech). *Langue* is the system or rules around language use such as syntax. *Parole* is use of language. For example, a film uses language as dialogue, but film genres such as mysteries, science fiction, or horror adhere to specific stylistic *conventions* (see Chapter 13 for more on this topic). **Conventions** include a particular

way of shooting a scene, use of lighting, shadows, or music. The viewer can anticipate these being included as a specific form of syntax in the film. In Saussure's view, language is comprised of signs that are made up of two components, signifiers (sounds or images) and the signifieds (concepts or ideas). The relationship between signifier, signified, and sign is illustrated in mathematical form:

$$\text{Signifier} + \text{Signified} = \text{Sign}$$

The **sign** is an empty container that is filled by meaning, meaning made by a particular culture. The **signified** is the mental concept, the idea of someone or something that exists between "a mental image, a concept, and a psychological reality" (Eco, 1976, pp. 14–15). The **signifier** is the material object, the tangible person or thing that can be seen, touched, tasted, or otherwise experienced. The sign is therefore the result of the interaction of these two components through the process of *signification*.

Whereas Saussure saw a science of signs, C.S. Peirce's (pronounced "purse") conception of signs was philosophical. He called the field "semeiotic" or "semiotic." Peirce created a taxonomy of signs, comprised of three types: (1) icons are signs that take meaning because they *resemble* someone or something, such as a photograph of Marilyn Monroe. It is a realistic *image* of someone or something but not the real thing, (2) **indexes** illustrate a cause and effect relationship, for example, an image of smoke coming out of a house indicates fire, and (3) **symbols** are signs that, through convention, take on a particular meaning, such as a flag, Star of David, or a swastika. Peirce created a triadic model comprised of three elements:

1. The **representamen** is the form the sign takes (not necessarily material, though usually interpreted as such), called by some the "sign vehicle."
2. An **interpretant** is the *sense* made of the sign, not an interpretation per se.
3. An **object** which exists beyond the sign, but to which it refers (*referent*)

Of this model Peirce (1931/1958, 2.228) said

a sign...is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen.

Therefore, the sign is made up of the meaning constructed for it is the product of a dynamic relationship between the ways sounds, words, and images are combined that produces meaning. These texts, whether visual, verbal, or written, are

constructed according to a kind of cultural semiotic logic that makes them make sense to us. According to Fredric Jameson (1972, p. 32–33)

It is not so much the individual word or sentence that “stands for” or “reflects” the individual object or event in the real world, but rather that the entire system of signs, the entire field of the *langue*, lies parallel to reality itself; that it is the totality of systematic language, in other words, which is analogous to whatever organized structures exist in the world of reality, and that our understanding proceeds from one whole or Gestalt to the other, rather than on a one-to-one basis.

How does this system operate in media? In advertising, for example, literal signs that advertise an establishment such as restaurant, bar, or grocery store stand in for a place or a thing and convey something about the essence of it. Logos operate in a similar way, conveying corporate identity along with an intangible something about the product or service through the use of particular colors and shapes. Thus, by looking at a particular text, for example an ad, it is possible to read it, that is, ascertain the message communicated. This meaning operates at two levels: connotative and denotative. The connotative meaning (from the Latin *connotare*) is filled with a specific culture content; it is the deeper level meaning, below the surface. The denotative meaning (from the Latin *denotare*) is the surface, literal meaning.

Semiotician Roland Barthes drew on his own (French) culture to explore objects such as the Citroen automobile, wrestling, and steak and *frites*. Connotative (deeper level) meanings are inferred and they take us into the realm of myth. A sign’s denotative meaning is on the surface, it is what we first take away, the explicit versus implicit meaning. Meaning is coded into a text by its creator based on his or her understanding of the culture and the goals of the form of communication. Codes are defined as “complex patterns of associations that all members of a given society and culture learn” (Berger, 2005, p. 30). The codes are learned structures that influence how we interpret what we hear and see. They produce a “symbolic convergence with a text” and the reader (Alfino, Caputo, & Wynyard, 1998, p. 43).

A Barbie doll is an example of a text that can be decoded. The denotative meaning of Barbie is a female doll which has specific anatomical measurements. However, the connotative meaning of Barbie is complex—she is the only *adult* doll, and her proportions *mean something* in an image-obsessed, consumer-driven culture, such as America’s. Hence, the entire package of and about Barbie, including her friends and possessions teach developing girls (the pedagogical role of myth) about what it means to be a woman in American culture. Understanding and using semiotics as method and perspective are important if, for no other reason, than to be literate in the underlying meaning structures of the information that circulates so widely around us. A study of signs “can assist us to become more aware of the mediating role” they play in our lives and the roles played by others

in response to them (Chandler, 2007, p. 10). Learning to decipher the codes that construct a text empowers informed choices. Not only is it important to be aware of the polysemy (multiple meanings) a sign might have, but also how, as Saussure warned us, a sign can be used as a devious agent for the propagation of an ideology. All signs exist in relation to the society within which they are created and “reveal whose realities are privileged and those who are suppressed” (Chandler, 2007, p. 11). Meaning can thereby be constructed in ways that conceal or reveal its intent.

Everything we do sends messages about us in a variety of codes, semiologists contend. We are also on the receiving end of innumerable messages encoded in music, gestures, foods, rituals, books, movies, or advertisements. Yet we seldom realize that we have received such messages, and would have trouble explaining the rules under which we operate. (Pines, 1982, n. p.)

In the essay “Myth Today,” Barthes (1972, p. 142) notes, “Semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, making contingency appear eternal. Now this process is exactly that of bourgeois ideology.” What signs share is an overarching context of vast human experience. These Big Stories are myths and appear in a variety of story telling modes, including the mass media. The style in which we wear our hair, whether a woman wears makeup or not (see Chapter 10 for more on this), our body language, and tone of voice say something about us to other people. In some cases, these artifacts suggest participation in a specific religion, political party, or value system and meaning is not arbitrary. Just as myths do, what something stands for naturally changes over time, evolving to remain relevant, based on conventions, and learned patterns. Moreover, these meanings are reinforced over our life, sometimes as the correct, natural, and right thing to do, wear, suggest, or carry. Thus, to interpret them, we must recognize the shared codes and conventions of language and symbols (and language as symbol) that govern a culture. An example that illustrates this point comes from politics.

On May 1, 2003, President George W. Bush arrived via jetfighter and boarded an aircraft carrier. He had declared the U.S. attack on Iraq a success under the banner “Mission Accomplished.” The event, arranged to stabilize the president’s image as protector of the country, heroic leader, and powerful president. Press photos and coverage sought to ground the president in this story of stability by providing what Barthes (1977, p. 40) termed **anchorage**, which is amplification of the meaning of a text and fixing it at a moment in time to mean something specific. This anchorage was, however, undone, by the reality of the situation there and thereafter when it became clear that the United States had no way out of the situation in Iraq, there were no “weapons of mass destruction” hidden there, and

overall uncertainty as to why the military was in Iraq in the first place given the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center in 2001 came from forces in Afghanistan. However, how or if the story of presidential power and progress was de-stabilized depended also on the point of view of the reader of the text (age, race, political perspective, education). The psychological location therefore relies on whether or not a person possesses a guiding mythology and/or participates in the mythology of his or her culture.

## A mythological model of the media

Mircea Eliade (1967, p. 28) pointed out, “Certain mythical themes still survive in modern societies, but are not readily recognizable since they have undergone a long process of laicization.” An “**onion of culture**” metaphor described what Eliade meant (Asa Berger, 2003). This metaphor suggests it takes peeling away each layer to find more at the core that’s central to the tale. Each stage (layer) brings us deeper and further back in time to what seems to be the origins of the story. For example, in the modern-day film genre the Western can be traced to the original Adam and Eve story. *Star Wars* is an example that clearly draws both on the modern Western formulas as well as mythological origins of the hero’s journey. A basic mythic mode for analyzing media images and stories was creatively constructed by Asa Berger (2005, p. 71). It recognizes “many of our activities are desacralized manifestations of ancient myths” and provides a framework with which we can **deconstruct** (take apart) a media text according to the following elements (see Table 1.1):

1. A myth (a sacred/ancient story)
2. A historical event related to the myth
3. The text or work from elite culture based on the myth
4. The text or work for popular culture based on the myth
5. Some aspects of everyday life based on the myth

An example of the application of this model is to deconstruct the main title sequence for the ABC television program *Desperate Housewives*. Every Sunday evening the program begins with a scene from the previous episode, pauses after a dramatic, introductory moment, and flips to the complex main title sequence of the Garden of Eden in a style reminiscent of German Renaissance painter Lucas Cranach’s oil *Adam and Eve* (1526).

The viewer is transported from the sacred story/myth through high and popular culture portrayals of the interactions between men and women, to the everyday world of Anystreet, United States, where suburban life carries the promise of freedom from the temptations of city life but lived reality is something quite different, particularly on Wisteria Lane. This flow makes sense immediately to

**Table 1.1:** Asa Berger’s Mythic Model of Media

|                              |  |  |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Myth/Sacred Story</b>     | Adam in the Garden of Eden. Theme of natural innocence                           | Oedipus Myth. Theme of son unknowingly killing father and marrying mother. |
| <b>Historical experience</b> | Puritans come to United States to escape corrupt European civilization           | Revolutions  |
| <b>Elite culture</b>         | American Adam figure in American novels. Henry James’ <i>The American</i>        | Sophocles, <i>Oedipus Rex</i><br>Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i>                |
| <b>Popular culture</b>       | Westerns...restore natural innocence to Virgin Land. <i>Shane</i> .              | Jack the Giant Killer  |
| <b>Everyday life</b>         | Escape from city and move to suburbs so kids can play on grass (and with grass). | Oedipus period in little children  |

Source Asa Berger, A. (2005, p. 71). *Shop ‘til You Drop: Consumer Behavior and American Culture*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

American viewers. Although we do not consciously process it, we are able to understand it in a mere twelve seconds because it is mythic, because it resonates with deeply held, puritanical visions of earthly paradise. In this animatronics version, Adam and Eve come alive in pop-up paper doll fashion. The apple falls, Eve (subtitle for actor Terri Hatcher enters) catches it under a tree in the Garden of Eden, hair tendrils wafting behind, and, according to creators yU+co., “in a Monty Python-esque moment, Eve lowers the boom on her disagreeable hubby with an apple the size of a Volkswagen” (Title sequence, n.d.). Next, an Egyptian woman, with four highly stylized Egyptian children slide in. The mother is subsumed by the little ones and then disappears amongst them (subtitles enter for actors Felicity Huffman and Marcia Cross).

This three-second moment is pushed aside by the famous van Eyck oil painting *The Arnolfini Portrait* (*The Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami*) (1434) (Figure 1.1). In the *Desperate Housewives* version, however, the man is animated, eats a banana (actor Eva Longoria Parker’s name enters), tosses the peel over his shoulder (actor Nicolette Sheridan’s name replaces Parker’s) and his wife sweeps it away.





**Figure 1.1:** Jan van Eyck. The Arnolfini portrait (the marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami) (1434).

Source: *National Gallery*, London / Art Resource, NY.

Next, the iconic Grant Wood painting *American Gothic* (1930) pushes out the Van Eyck.

In the *Desperate Housewives* version, however, the farmer has a wandering eye and smiles as he is tickled under the chin by World War II pin-up girl. His dismayed wife melds into the cover of a sardine can, supplanted by what appears to be homage to Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup can, ending in Lichtenstein-like cartoon character couple of Robert Dale's *Couple Arguing* and *Romantic Couple*. The tearful woman punches the man, and the subtitle of omniscient (dead) narrator Mary Alice enters. The final image is of the glamorous foursome (main characters Susan, Bree, Gabrielle, and Lynette), as bright red apples land in each well-manicured hand and the serpent dangles from a branch behind. Male actor names float in and out. Image producer Lane Jensen adds, "Each [image] calls to mind one of the gripes women have faced over the years from infidelity to a husband who can't pick up after himself." The core message: According to one of the sequence creators, Garson Yu, the creators used "iconic imagery to convey the anguish of the feminine mind." The sequence shows allegedly untrustworthy and wily women throughout time who, as do the women of Wisteria Lane, come out on top.

Psychologist James Hillman (1975, p. 3) states, "by telling mythical stories about our lives we can direct fantasy into organized, deeply life-giving psychological patterns." The media tell stories composed of various signs and symbols that reflect agreed-upon, common understandings, that is, patterns. How these representations are communicated in society and reified through rituals, images, symbols, and language, is central to understanding the media as mechanisms through which meaning is made. Meaning making practices are central to any culture, serving as social glue that binds people together over what are thought to be shared beliefs. Although the term "myth" is often used to indicate something that is not true, this is misuse of the word. Myths make stories seem "natural and eternal" and

in passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions, because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (Barthes, 1957/1973, p. 143)

Popular culture narratives function in this way. In movies, television programs, and advertisements a world is created that denies "the human complexity of acts" and the realities of human history. A simple, clear, peaceful world is presented devoid of the complexity of real human interactions. Thus, as metaphors, myths are "comparisons by which we hope to gain some useful insight into our condition and our place in the cosmos" (Voytilla, 1999, p. 9).

## Myth in the Modern World

Media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through which we insert ourselves into this culture. (Kellner, 1995, p. 5)

Myth analysis has been used in media studies primarily to examine films and news. In news, this approach has been applied to study differences between events and the symbols used to construct stories about them (Coman & Rothenbuhler, 2005; Marvin & Ingle, 1999; Campbell, 1995; Bird & Dardenne, 1988; Graham & Dean, 1982). For example, we see how the news media present the American flag (Marvin & Ingle, 1999), how the events of 9/11 were contextualized (Rothenbuhler, 2005), and how news operates as cultural narrative in the construction of history (Liebes & Blondheim, 2005). In an analysis of drama-as-myth and the Peking Opera in the People's Republic of China, Denton (1987) describes how myth can be used to sustain a point of view but at the same time disguises political intentions of its creator, when in what otherwise might be seen as a simple play or story "myth becomes a devious agent for the propagation of an ideology" (p. 120). Furthermore,

an ideology requires myth to promote and sustain itself; it needs myth to transform 'history into nature.' If the supremacy of Mao Zedong's Thought is simply stated or explained in dry theoretical treatises or newspaper articles it does not appear as a natural image of reality: it is cold and unappealing. In myth, the meaningful sign on the first level of signification lends a naturalness and ineluctability to its emptied form on the mythic level. (p. 133)

Researchers argue that news follows a mythological narrative pattern that is communal, orienting, and ritualistic. Myth helps explain the inexplicable, organizes the disorganized. News helps us with that as well as "news is a particular kind of mythological narrative with its own symbolic codes that are recognized by its audience" (Bird & Dardenne, 1988, p. 71). Journalists, who are raised in the same culture as their readers, operate by the same narrative codes and draw upon this knowledge when writing stories. Thus, by reading newspaper stories we can learn the mythic codes, value, and symbols of a culture.

It is probably easier to see how mythic narratives are used in film because so much of film is obviously story telling and fantasy, whereas in news the hero archetype might be less obvious when articulated as a politician, sports figure, or celebrity who faces challenges and transcends limitations. Voytilla's (1999) seven archetypes described earlier present a model for thinking about how myth operates in movies. Film analyses using a mythic approach include studies of *An Inconvenient Truth* (Rosteck & Frentz, 2007); *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kuberski, 2008); *The*

*Matrix* (Cook, 2007); a mythic analysis of the western films of director John Ford (Bohnke, 2001); and an analysis of the films of director David Cronenberg (Lasiera, 2008).

With news, our expectations of truth are of a certain kind, and we look to experts to help us fill in the blanks for what we don't understand. Film varies more widely depending on whether it is a documentary, presented as history, or presented as fantasy. Yet, even fantasy carries a kind of universal truth. But how do we know what is true? Are there different truths? Whose reality is presented as the right, correct, and true one? Whose myth are we living today? We can approach answering these questions by examining the study of knowledge (**epistemology**) and consider how we learn about how something influences what we believe we know to be "the truth."

## Epistemology

You're going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our point of view. (Obi-Wan Kenobi)

What do we believe about what we see in life and what we see presented in the mass media? How do we *know* something is real or false, a truth or a lie? Our access to a sense of certainty about "truth" or "reality" traditionally comes from central social institutions such as the church (or other religious group), the government, the family, and education. It is from these sources and the individuals in charge of them that a child learns what is right or wrong, what qualities make for a good boy or a good girl, a real man or a real woman. The philosophy of ways of knowing, the study of knowledge, is epistemology and has been explored by countless philosophers, linguists, and sociologists (Kerlinger, 1973; Kuhn, 1962). There are many ways of "knowing" and evaluating a truth and/or a fiction. They include:

1. *Scientific knowledge.* Looking to science is one of the most common ways people feeling they can know something to be true. This method "attempts to define a process for defining truth that produces results verifiable by others and is self-correcting" (Huitt, 1998, n.p.) using categorizations and taxonomic models.
2. *Faith based knowledge.* Here "truth is established through a trusted source such as God, tradition, or public sanction" (Huitt, 1998, n.p.) or in holy writings such as the Talmud, Bible, and Koran.
3. *Intuition or personal knowledge/experience.* Also known as the method of tenacity advocated by Peirce (Kerlinger, 1973). In this case, "truth is what is