Rhetoric and Culture

We make our meaning together with a text, we wrestle with what we see and talk back to it, and we become more fully ourselves in the process.

—Edward Hirsch (1999, p. 260)

Introduction

Rhetorical criticism and cultural criticism are different intellectual practices with very different pasts. Rhetoric had its beginnings in classical Greece 2,500 years ago, whereas cultural studies had its current roots in Great Britain in the 1970s. Rhetoric locates and analyzes what are the available means of persuasion and information and how they work; cultural analysis examines the strands of meanings that can be made from discourse and how they relate to social practices. Rhetoric examines the intention of symbolization; cultural criticism examines the struggle and conflict over meaning. Neither rhetoric nor cultural studies is monolithic, however. Both practices have a repertoire of methodologies, some more explicit than others. Each practice can be useful to you as a television critic, or combinations of the methodologies may yield answers to questions one asks about television.

There are areas of overlap, as exemplified in Thomas Rosteck’s book *At the Intersection: Cultural Studies and Rhetorical Studies*. Both rhetoric and cultural studies “address specific and parallel questions about culture,
critical practice, and interpretation” (Rosteck, 1999, p. viii). Rosteck cited Cary Nelson and Dilip Gaonkar, whose review of some early cultural studies concluded that “cultural studies has been deeply, if broadly, textual and rhetorical in its methodology” (Rosteck, 1999, p. 9). Both perspectives recognize that meanings are related to particular contexts. Rosteck wrote:

Rhetorical studies offers a mode of analysis for thinking about how texts are produced (intent), what they are (textuality), and what they do (consumption/effects.) A more properly “rhetorical cultural studies” recognizes that the perspectives of rhetoric define an approach that holds in suspension text and producer, text and reader, text and society . . . Cultural studies . . . delivers to rhetorical studies a richer and more fully realized model of how discourse is always a product of wider social formations and reflects necessarily the materialization of the ideology that gave birth to it. It offers a more sophisticated sense of the text-history-audience-critic relationship and also the crucial relationship between texts and critical methodologies, namely how history and ideology shape readings and critical work . . . The ideal relationship between rhetorical studies and cultural studies is one of mutual critique and transformation. (Rosteck, 1999, p. 22)

This chapter describes salient aspects of rhetorical criticism and cultural criticism. As a critic of television, you can pick and choose various aspects from one or the other or from a blend of both. What is most important is what you ask about a television program or series. The tools to find the answers to those questions may then be sought out.

Rhetoric

Rhetoric is a twofold field of study: rhetorical criticism and rhetorical theory. Since this is a book about criticism, rhetorical criticism will be the main focus, although it is apparent that rhetorical criticism is grounded in theories.

Rhetoric is the study of symbols and how they are used to influence. Rhetorical criticism focuses on the conception, composition, presentation, and reception of messages that tend to be persuasive in nature, although they may also be informative. It is also a humane field of study of the choices made by persuaders, informers, and audiences as they work to co-create meaning and sustain human sociality. It is, thus, a cooperative art that brings senders and receivers of messages together in an attempt to bring about voluntary change or enlightenment. Classically conceived, rhetoric is concerned with systematic principles of idea development and reasoning, known as
invention, organization, style, presentation, and ways to recall information, known as memory, all of which are phenomena that a critic can uncover and observe. It is believed that the success and significance of the messages are related to the methods used to develop and present them. A rhetorical critic identifies and explains how the methods of message development work to persuade or inform an audience.

*Law & Order*, a television series created by Dick Wolf that has been on the air since 1989, is about the police finding and arresting a criminal in the first half hour of the show, and lawyers prosecuting that criminal in the courtroom in the second half hour. When Assistant District Attorneys Alexandria Borgia (Annie Parisse) and Jack McCoy (Sam Waterston) make a persuasive speech to a jury, it is natural and appropriate to rhetorically analyze and criticize the arguments, evidence, and emotional pleas contained within the speech. When Cliff Huxtable (Bill Cosby) taught a moral lesson to one of his children on *The Cosby Show*, the persuasion in his words and deeds was readily apparent to most viewers. These persuasive messages of television programs can be rhetorically analyzed, for they are, in essence, discourse, that is, spoken or reported talk that sets forth ideas about a subject.

What, then, of television programs such as *CSI* or *The New Adventures of Old Christine* that have entertainment as the major focus for both their creators and their audience? Is it possible to use the concepts of rhetoric to analyze and criticize television programs when persuasion may not be so apparent? What about the background sounds (sound effects and music) and the images of television? Can they be analyzed according to principles of rhetoric as well? This chapter attempts to answer these questions, define television rhetoric, and introduce some aspects of rhetoric that can be used to analyze television.

First, it is necessary to understand what rhetoric is and how the rhetorical critic applies principles of rhetoric to a message. Rhetorical studies have been an important part of education since ancient Greece. Contemporary theories of rhetoric have been derived and adapted from the major treatises of classical writers such as Aristotle and Cicero. Throughout history, rhetorical theorists developed principles of rhetoric to try to understand the discourse of their own times—in assemblies, war councils, royal courts, elections, legal courts and councils, in the church, and in the marketplace. Mostly, they dealt with words because the messages were verbally conveyed, but many also dealt with the character of the speaker or treatise and presentational elements as well. Today, we communicate with images, sounds, and, of course, words, and we have adapted principles of rhetoric to understand the visual, aural, and verbal elements of messages.
Classical Rhetoric

Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric has been an enduring one and, because of its extensive scope, has been used to justify rhetorical analysis of media. He defined rhetoric as “the faculty of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion” (Cooper, 1932, p. 7). Because the political and judicial systems placed prominence on oral persuasion in Aristotle’s Greece, his theory of rhetoric was based upon observing persuasion in politics, in the courts, and in ceremonies. In *Rhetoric* (333 BCE), he laid out certain principles and classifications of persuasion in the context of occasions—courtroom proceedings, public ceremonies, and legislative and political activities. Aristotle viewed persuasion as an instrument of social adaptation, for it enabled people to live in society using strategically selected and stylized speech to influence one another. Rhetoric was very important in Greece, for people used it to debate internal problems as well as to decide which values were important in society. Through persuasive discourse, people attempted to reason together, to discuss ideas, and to make decisions regarding their lives. People such as Alexander the Great, who chose a career in public life, studied with teachers of rhetoric, including Aristotle, to learn how to choose message content (invention); how to arrange the content (arrangement); how to stylize the content into clear and impressive language (style); how to recall the content (memory); and how to present (delivery). These five categories were classified by Roman rhetoricians and are known as the canons of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery.

Such a rhetorical system seems pragmatic and formulaic, but Aristotle’s major contribution was invention, the development of ideas and the selection of content, namely proof. If one were to persuade, it was assumed that one had to prove an argument. Aristotle classified proof into two categories: *inartistic*, that which a persuader could refer to but not have to control—such as documents, wills, contracts, torture, situations, and even physical qualities—and *artistic*, that which a persuader could create or manipulate. Artistic proofs were of three major types: *ethos*, the speaker’s character, integrity, and goodwill—known in contemporary terms as “source credibility”; *pathos*, the persuader’s appeals to the emotions of the audience and the situation; and *logos*, the persuader’s appeals to the rational side of the audience as well as their ability to process information.

*Logos* means “word” in Greek and probably comes closest to the contemporary meaning of communication as an interactive process during which the speaker and audience create and share intellectual meaning. Aristotle’s two forms of *logos* were proof through examples and proof through enthymemes. Examples enabled the persuader to generalize and prove through
citation of evidence that was meaningful to the audience, while enthymemes enabled the persuader and audience to co-create reasoning by interactively coming to a conclusion. The audience was an essential component of Aristotle’s rhetoric, for the persuader not only appealed to an audience, but the audience completed the reasoning process by supplying missing elements.

Television advertising uses both forms of logos, especially enthymemes. A commercial for yogurt uses the song “Itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny, yellow polka dot bikini” with an image of a yellow polka dot bikini hanging on the wall. A woman walks past the bikini while eating yogurt several times, wearing different outfits to suggest the passing of time. The commercial ends when she takes the bikini off the wall and gets into a convertible with a friend. The audience is expected to fill in the rest of the proof, namely that eating yogurt has enabled her to lose enough weight to fit into the bikini.

Aristotle’s approach to rhetoric was pragmatic, but it also carried with it the cultural ideal of Greek society, that humanity should strive for excellence and to live life in a morally responsible way. The Greek work telos, meaning end or completion, stood for an optimal moral end. In ancient Greece, a person tried to achieve his or her telos by the end of life because by such an achievement, that person would experience moral excellence and contemplative happiness, and others would bestow virtue upon him or her. The Greeks considered rhetoric as the means that moved people toward a telos of moral excellence, for the end of rhetoric was the formation of public character in those with the potential for moral action.

Rhetoric Over the Ages

Many of Aristotle’s principles and classifications were carried over and elaborated upon throughout history by a succession of rhetoricians such as St. Augustine (426) who developed the study of preaching for the clergy; Francis Bacon (1623) who incorporated scientific theory-building into the study of rhetoric; François Fenelon (1717) who stressed the social character of rhetoric and the use of communication to instruct and inform; and George Campbell (1776), a Scottish theologian who drew upon the works of early psychology to analyze audiences and developed four ends of speaking “to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, or to influence the will” (Golden & Corbett, 1968, p. 145).

These early forerunners of contemporary rhetoric offered rich and important ideas that may be adapted to the analysis and criticism of television. Although Aristotle limited his rhetoric to the discovery of the means of persuasion, later rhetoricians recognized information as a form of rhetoric. One way of describing the function of rhetoric without wedding it to persuasion
or information was expressed by Donald C. Bryant, who wrote that the function of rhetoric is “adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas” (Bryant, 1953, p. 420).

Intentionality

Whether the desired purpose is persuasion or information, intentionality is often seen as the key focus of rhetoric, although not all rhetorical theorists agree. Aristotle laid the groundwork for the concept of intentionality with his teleological view of nature. Intentionality as activity is explicit in the work of contemporary philosopher John R. Searle (1979, 1984), who wrote that intentionality is “the feature by which our mental states are directed at, about, or refer to, or are of objects and states of affairs in the world other than themselves” (Searle, 1984, p. 16). Searle put it another way when he wrote quite simply, “If I have an intention, it must be an intention to do something” (Searle, 1984, p. 1). Rhetoricians note that intention carries with it the notion of consciousness because a person plans “for the purpose of obtaining some specifiable outcome” (Arnold & Bowers, 1984, pp. 875–876). In other words, intention is the purpose and end desired from an audience; however, it is not always possible to know the exact intention of a communicator. Thus, Arnold and Bowers modify the notion of intention to mean an attributed intention.

We assume that a scriptwriter for a situation comedy has the attributed intent to provoke laughter from an audience, or that a writer for a soap opera has the attributed intent to involve the viewer in a situation so he or she will tune in next time to find out what happens. In more obvious cases, we assume that a television commercial has the attributed intent to have the viewer remember the brand name, to have a positive attitude toward it, and to buy the product. There may be other more subtle attributed intentions in television fiction and nonfiction such as influencing attitudes and beliefs or reinforcing values and cultural norms. There may even be subconscious intentions that could be derived from a critic’s interpretation.

The Symbolic Nature of Rhetoric

Rhetoric by its nature examines the symbolic, that is, symbols or words and images that stand for something else. As humans we generate symbols and expect others to know the meaning of the symbols. Symbols rely upon connections that are not necessarily causal. The word “cow” symbolizes a four-legged bovine mammal, but it is an arbitrary symbol that we have learned to mean a four-legged bovine mammal. The same animal is symbolized
as *vache* in French and *Kuh* in German, neither of which resembles the English symbol “cow.” The English language might have assigned a different symbol, for example, “ballerina,” and that would have been the name that people learned to identify a four-legged bovine mammal.

Symbols stand for ideas and acts, that is, they stand in the place of ideas and acts, and, most significantly, symbols are created to signify something. The symbol © was created to signify “copyright,” but one has to learn this meaning or it means nothing. Visual symbols such as a couple embracing or a father playing ball with his son may stand for a value such as love. It has been said that meanings lie in people, not in words, thus if a word or an image stimulates a recognition of something familiar in the audience’s experience, then communication takes place. What symbols are attended to by an audience and how they are received is dependent upon a variety of factors—the perceptions, experiences, needs, and uses that an audience makes of television.

Television rhetoric works to shape audience expectations by conspicuously promoting programs and attempting to direct viewer perceptions through images and words. Although viewers choose what to treat as messages, television rhetoric actively attempts to shape those choices. It is, indeed, a circular situation, for television creators tap into cultural norms to attract an audience, and the audience in turn responds to them because they are agreeable, that is, some of the time. As we will see in the section on cultural studies, an audience can also choose to resist or negotiate meanings.

The Rhetoric of Kenneth Burke

A rhetorician who greatly influenced 20th-century rhetoric was Kenneth Burke. He defined rhetoric as “the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or induce actions in other human agents” (Burke, 1950, p. 41). He said that whatever form rhetoric takes, it is “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (Burke, 1950, p. 43). He contributed the idea of *identification* to rhetoric, that is, when people share a common substance or properties—citizenship, physical objects, occupations, friends, common enemies, activities, beliefs, and values—they unite by sharing a common substance, or in Burke’s term, they become consubstantial, which means of the same substance. Burke added, however, that people share substance only momentarily because each person is unique. He wrote that identification was the key to persuasion: “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his” (Burke, 1950, p. 21). Identification can be on a conscious level. For example, Jennifer Aniston’s hairstyle on *Friends* influenced a great many women to get their hair...
cut in the same style. On the other hand, Burke believed that identification can be subconscious or unconscious. For example, a person who buys a fancy bicycle may be subconsciously identifying with Lance Armstrong, seven-time winner of the Tour de France bicycle race, even though the bicycle was purchased to go back and forth to school.

Burke developed his concept of identification because he believed that people are basically divided or estranged from one another, therefore, they communicate in order to eliminate that division. Through identification with a common substance, people may transcend their differences and unite in a common attitude or behavior. As Robert Heath explained,

By sharing common symbols—particularly those which relate to personal identity and role—individuals can be brought together. The key to using this strategy is to discover abstract terms high in the hierarchy of our vocabulary. The formula went this way: the higher, and therefore more abstract, the term [or symbol], the greater its appeal because it could encompass the identities of more people. (Heath, 1986, p. 17)

The Cosby Show, with its all–African American cast, was not only enormously popular in the United States but also in South Africa during apartheid. Perhaps the reason for its popularity in a country divided by racism was that the higher symbol that the show emphasized was family and not race. Dennis Ciesielski pointed out that Burke anticipated “the postmodern concept of the transcendent signifier in his observation that all action is symbolic of other action, all signs hold further implications” (Ciesielski, 1999, p. 244).

Although Burke stressed language, he included in rhetoric many other forms of discourse, including nonverbal activity, literature, and art. Art, he said, instructs people about their moral and social responsibilities. In a seminar that Burke taught when I was in graduate school, he told us that his definition of rhetoric included television. Identification between a viewer and a television program is usually a matter of preference for a certain character or the recognition of a situation in the program as being similar to the viewer's, but identification has the capability to influence the viewer to become involved to the point where he or she may adopt certain ways of speaking, clothing styles, mannerisms, or even attitudes and behaviors.

Burke described communication as a form of courtship whereby its form is an arousing and fulfillment of desires. He wrote, “A work has form insofar as one part of it leads a reader [viewer] to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence” (Burke, 1931/1957, p. 124). This is exactly what television does, as stated in the desire/satisfaction formula in Chapter 1:
television executives and producers try to know what it is that the audience desires and then satisfy that desire in order to maintain an audience following. Burke’s rhetoric is too complex to include its details in a single chapter. He offers a myriad of ways to examine rhetoric, many of which are suitable and useful for television criticism. There are several good books on Burke’s theories of rhetoric and studies that use his various approaches to criticism such as the Dramatistic Pentad, cluster analysis, terministic screens, the representative anecdote, and the demonic trinity. The titles of these and other books on rhetorical criticism can be found at the end of this chapter.

There are other methods of rhetorical criticism that may be adapted to television. For example, rhetorical criticism can be used to critique belief systems that form interpretations of race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, and sexual identity. Because these can also be analyzed with cultural studies approaches, they will be discussed later in the chapter. Because television is representational, these aspects are also discussed in Chapter 7, “Representation and Its Audience.”

Television Rhetoric

Television informs, persuades, and represents the real and fictional worlds to its audience. Television utilizes conventional organization both in its scheduling and within the structure of programs. Both fiction and non-fiction television have the capability to elicit identification from viewers. Television relies on viewer memory to keep up with the plots and characters from day to day on soap operas and from week to week on prime-time series. Television has specific stylistic features that use both visual and aural symbols. The most rhetorical aspect of television is that viewers participate while they watch it and afterwards. They perceive, interpret, and accept or reject images as real or imaginary; they respond with laughter, shock, concern, relaxation, and reassurance; they talk about favorite shows with friends, fellow students, and coworkers. When my oldest son was a teenager, he and my mother would discuss at length the episodes of All My Children. Nancy Franklin, writing in The New Yorker, said that the people she knows talk about 24, the series about counterterrorism agent Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland), in which events unfold in real time over the course of one day. Franklin said that one woman calls her friend at the end of each show to discuss it; couples make dates to watch and discuss it together (Franklin, 2006). Television influences our language and what issues we consider important (the agenda-setting function of media). Agenda-setting is about the gatekeeping function of media news, whereby journalists tell viewers what issues are important. Research has shown that the news
media have not told people what to think, but they have told them what to think about. Television also influences our perception of politicians and celebrities, fashion, hairstyles, fitness, and even what breed of dog to acquire. The outcome of the televised Westminster Kennel Club’s annual dog show and the selection of “best in show” often results in an increase of popularity in certain breeds of dogs.

Some examples of popular language expressions that were used on television programs are the following: “Awright, I’ll tell ya what I’m gonna do!” (Texaco Star Theater), “Beam me up, Scotty.” (Star Trek), “meathead and dingbat” (All in the Family), “The devil made me do it.” (The Flip Wilson Show), “Yada Yada” (Seinfeld), “Wild and crazy guys” (Saturday Night Live), and “Don’t have a cow, man” and “D’oh!” (The Simpsons), “How you doin’?” (Friends), “Hey, Dummy!” (My Name is Earl), and advertising slogans: “Kodak moment,” “Pepsi generation,” “Where’s the beef?” and “I can’t believe I ate the whole thing.”

While the sender’s intent may be to entertain, there is always the possibility of influence whether it is direct or indirect. The intention of the sender is to capture a large share of the audience as measured by ratings, or it may be to get an audience to believe that what they see is really there as in news reporting or documentaries. Television commentators may influence our thinking by interpreting television speeches and events. Other examples of persuasion may be television’s attempt to educate the public about a health hazard, to uphold law and order, to strengthen attitudes about diversity, to cherish family values, to foster competition, and so on. Verbal, visual, and aural symbols are chosen, arranged, and delivered to the audience. Which message symbols are attended to by an audience and how they are received is dependent upon a variety of factors—the perceptions, experiences, needs, and uses that an audience makes of television. Just as the senders may choose to treat television programming as messages, audiences also choose to treat television as a message.

Television rhetoric attempts to shape viewer expectations by conspicuously promoting programs and attempting to direct viewer perceptions. Media television critics tell viewers what they will and will not like on television. Internet blogs, sometimes written by television writers, tell viewers what to anticipate. What an audience attends to on television is, however, determined by many factors and individual preferences.
Rhetoric and Values

Television embodies the values of a culture, the values of the people who produce television programs, and the values of the people who watch them. Values are important to understanding the rhetoric of television because they are a crucial part of our belief systems. The accepted and affirmed cultural values of the mass audience are echoed in television situation comedies and dramas’ resolutions of conflict as well as in the news and other nonfiction programming. A value is defined as an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable. Specifically, a value is a prescriptive belief that judges whether or not a means or an end is desirable or undesirable. Conventional values are familiar standards of conduct as the rhetorician Karl Wallace pointed out in his essay “The Substance of Rhetoric: Good Reasons”: “Some of them [the values] are compressed in concepts with which all of us are familiar: good and evil, pleasant-unpleasant, duty, obligation, self-interest, altruism, truth-telling, promise-keeping, honesty, fairness, courage, law-observance, utility, right and wrong, and the like. They appear typically in general statements called rules of conduct, regulations, laws, codes, principles, and moral maxims” (Wallace, 1971, p. 363). Values may, of course, be very personal and private, but they are public as well, for they are shared with and taught to others. Because values are important, they operate as measuring sticks against which behavior is measured and goals are obtained.

Television’s fictional characters and their stories reinforce audience values, teach values to the audience, and use values as reasons for supporting resolutions of conflict. Television narratives frequently reflect values such as the work ethic, fair play, optimism, sensibility, justice, happiness, and good humor. Television stars such as Oprah Winfrey, Ray Romano, Mariska Hargitay, Ice-T, Edward James Olmos, Sam Waterston, Katie Couric, and Charles Gibson represent honesty, strength, goodness, fair-mindedness, and the vulnerability of the ideal American culture. News anchors like Walter Cronkite, Tom Brokaw, and Peter Jennings represented integrity and compassion. The creators of television programs are more likely to produce programs that reinforce values that relate to the nation’s strengths and virtues. Television programs such as Sesame Street tend to be morality shapers, touching on themes of love, honesty, tolerance, and altruism. Family situation comedies tend to conclude each program with a mini-moral that reinforces family togetherness and parental authority. Values are inherent in reality shows that emphasize competition, victory, and rewards.
Every episode of *Frasier* illustrated strong values with which the audience could identify. The values were close family relationships, friendship, decency, compassion, and kindness. For example, in one episode, Frasier, pretentious as usual, wants to buy an educational toy for his son Frederick for Christmas, but he cannot decide whether to get a Junior Astronomer set or a Living Brain. Frasier’s father Martin tells him that he should find out what Frederick really wants for Christmas. On Christmas morning, Frederick tells Frasier that he really wants an Outlaw Laser Robo-Geek. Martin has bought this toy to give to his grandson, but he gives it to Frasier to wrap and give to Frederick, thereby kindly teaching his son a lesson for living.

Values are also explicit in television news. Sociologist Herbert J. Gans analyzed values in network television news over 20 years. His findings were categorized into six types of values: (1) ethnocentrism—American news values its own nation above all, and foreign news is interpreted by the extent to which other nations live up to or imitate American values; (2) altruistic democracy—democracy is presented as superior to other forms of government; (3) responsible capitalism—competition is valued along with optimism and economic growth; (4) small-town pastoralism—small towns are perceived as friendly, cohesive, and slow-paced, all of which are desirable; (5) individualism—rugged individuals and self-made men and women are valued as heroes; (6) moderatism—groups that behave moderately are valued as opposed to extremists. Gans concluded that most news stories are about the violation of values, although the values themselves may not be explicitly articulated. He also noted that the values perceived by viewers tend to be the values that the viewers themselves believe in. He said that value-laden language reveals values: for example, a politician “arrives” in a city but a troublemaker “turns up” there. Rhetorical analysis of values attempts to uncover what Arnold and Bowers called “attributed intentions” because, as Gans wrote, the values underlying the news stories are implicit and subject to viewer recognition and interpretation (Gans, 1979, 2004).

Values are highly personal and enduring, therefore we defend them with great passion. This is what makes values effective as anchors for persuasion. A value is used as an anchor when audience belief is used as a foundation to create another belief. For example, if the audience believes in national security, then a related belief in support of luggage searches at airports can be derived from the first belief. As a consensus-building exercise in one of my classes, I asked the students to bring to class a list of values that were most important to them. The goal was to eventually compile a list of values that
everyone in the class agreed upon in order to construct arguments such as “If you believe in good health, then you should stop smoking,” or “If you value the environment, then you should recycle newspapers, plastic, and glass.” The students put their values on the board for all to see. After we condensed duplicates—and there were many—I asked the students individually to walk up and erase any values that were not important to them. They erased “competition,” “beauty,” and “power,” but much to my surprise, one person erased “equality.” Then a student who is Hispanic-American walked to the board and erased everything. He said, “If you do not value equality, then I do not support any of your values.” Needless to say, we had a strong class discussion that day, but the point of including this incident in this chapter is to remind us that not only are values extremely important to individuals, they are also not universally agreed upon.

Because television addresses a mass audience, the values that are inherent in its programs are collectively dominant in the culture. Values represent patterns of life in a culture, but marginalized people, whose life patterns differ from those of the mainstream, may or may not accept them. How, then, do they gain enjoyment from watching television? To answer that, we turn to cultural studies.

**Cultural Studies**

Because television is a major form of communication, a source of social understanding, and a connection to lifestyles other than our own, it is of major concern in cultural studies. Jeff Lewis (2002), whose book *Cultural Studies: The Basics* is a helpful guide to the subject, maintained that there are many forms of culture, for example, national culture, family culture, and television culture. Culture is defined as “actual practices and customs, languages, beliefs, forms of representation, and a system of formal and informal rules that tell people how to behave most of the time and enable people to make sense of their world through a certain amount of shared meanings and recognition of different meanings” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2006, p. 193).

*Meaning* is a key concept in cultural studies, for meaning, as noted earlier, does not reside in a symbol, visual or verbal, but is in the relationship between a viewer of television and what is viewed. Meaning lies in the power of a symbol to signify something and in the viewer’s potential to derive meaning from the symbol. In television, the viewer is the necessary other to be provoked into making meaning possible. The relationship between the viewer and the symbol is a complex one in which various elements interact and lead to an outcome that is dependent on culture and the cultural practices. Consequently,
the possibility of multiple meanings, *polysemy*, exists because various viewers incorporate their own experiences, lifestyles, values, and other cultural practices into their interpretations. The multiple meanings of various viewers cannot be reduced to a common mean or median, nor can derived meanings be fixed or stable across time.

For example, in an episode of *ER*, the television drama about a Chicago hospital emergency room, two African American surgeons, Dr. Peter Benton and Dr. Cleo Finch, are seen attending to a patient while nearby on the other side of the room, a group of five medical students, four men and one woman, are getting a tour of the emergency facilities. Dr. Finch, who is very light in color, says, “What is wrong with this picture?” Dr. Benton, who has much darker skin, is focusing on his patient and says, “Hmm?” Dr. Finch then says, “Those medical students—not a black face in the bunch.” Getting no response from him, Dr. Finch says, “That doesn’t concern you?” Dr. Benton looks up at the students and replies, “I see five. Not exactly a representative sample.” She responds with, “I’m glad you take such an interest.” He chuckles and nothing else is said, but the look that is exchanged between these two doctors, who are also lovers, is probably meant to imply that Dr. Benton is not going to make an issue of racial diversity and that he can be quite patronizing when it comes to logic. This is consistent with how his character was portrayed on the series, for he was a brilliant, competent, and ambitious but arrogant surgeon.

A cultural studies critic would ask what meanings viewers could make of this brief scene. One viewer might agree with Dr. Finch that there should be better racial representation. Another might agree with Dr. Benton’s logic, concluding that you cannot generalize from a small sample. Another might conclude that practicing good medicine is an African American doctor’s only concern. Someone else might say that both positions are fairly represented and that is acceptable. There could be other meanings. For example, one could dispute the untypical representation of race in an elitist profession that requires years of study at great financial cost because such circumstances are unavailable to those without opportunity. Although Dr. Benton, professionally acted by Eriq La Salle, is an extremely competent surgeon, he is also very arrogant and moody, thus another viewer might say that he is “uppity” and erudite and no longer in touch with people of his race. Michael Michele, who played Dr. Finch, is tall, model-thin, and beautiful. Another viewer might see her as unrepresentative of women in general or African American women in particular and therefore be unable to identify with her or her attitude at all. For others, she could be a role model of what other women want to become. Someone else could observe that Dr. Finch did not say anything
about the disproportionate ratio of men to women in the group of five medical students. Still another might note that because the chief of staff, Dr. Romano, and the chief attending emergency room doctor, Dr. Green, are white males, they represent white male dominance over the African American doctors.

These various meanings are some of the possible responses of several viewers upon seeing a brief scene on television; therefore the scene has the potential to be polysemous. Cultural studies critics understand that many meanings can be made from a single scene because viewers observe and interpret images and supporting dialogue through the lens of their own cultural experiences.

There are many ways to conduct a cultural studies critique, for there are many theoretical foundations ranging from writings by Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Lawrence Grossberg, and others. Also, as historical and political conditions change, cultural studies practitioners respond with relevant analyses. This chapter will not recount the history and various theories behind cultural studies, but rather this chapter offers a selection of some of the most influential ideas in contemporary cultural studies that can be constituted to develop critical approaches. (See Selected Readings in Cultural Studies at the end of this chapter.)

British Cultural Studies

Although cultural studies can be traced back to the 17th century, certain British academics were the first in the English-speaking world to address the making of meaning within culture. Thus, cultural studies, as we know it, grew out of the British Cultural Studies movement, primarily from the vision of Raymond Williams, a professor at Cambridge University, who said that there was no academic subject that enabled him to ask how culture and society and democracy and the individual voice could relate to one another. Williams believed that culture concerns everyone, for it is about the symbolic life of people. Williams was especially concerned with the customs of the working class. For example, in one of the programs that he made for the British Broadcasting Company, he talked about 18th-century paintings that depicted beautiful land and domestic animals. One painting had a very young girl, obviously of the upper class, dressed up in shepherd’s clothes watching the sheep grazing on a meadow. Williams asked, “Where are the real shepherds?” His point was that the workers upon whom the running of the estate depended were invisible. Williams insisted on thinking about a painting or a
novel or a television program from a much broader range of cultural practice. His writings encourage us to try to formulate meanings other than our own, “. . . in judging a culture, it is not enough to concentrate on habits which coincide with those of the observer” (Higgins, p. 59). He wrote: “. . . cultural texts should never be seen as isolated but always as part of a shared practice of making meaning involving everyone in a particular culture” (Couldry, 2000, p. 24). Williams asked how a work—any work—relates to the shared conditions of its time and what meanings a work has when it is absorbed into the lives of its audience. He believed that every person has the right to be seen and heard. This is the basic tenet of cultural studies.

Nick Couldry, whose book is a very helpful guide to cultural studies methodology as well as a critique of it, made the point that culture as it is actually practiced is a concentration of voices but not a dispersal of them. This prevents people from speaking in their own voices because they are represented by others (Couldry, 2000).

Williams also articulated his theory of “flow” on television as timed, sequential units that form a montage with confusing, overall meaning. For example, parts of television programs are melded to commercials, promotions, and public service announcements that flow into the news, and a talk show and then to a movie. These disparate items are assembled and placed within the same viewing experience.

Stuart Hall, professor emeritus at the Open University and a visiting professor at Goldsmiths College, University of London, is probably the most influential and prominent British cultural studies scholar. Whereas Williams was concerned with the laboring classes, Hall has used many examples of race and immigration in the United Kingdom in his writings and videos. (See Hall entries in the Bibliography.) Hall’s contributions are many, but his model of the encoding and decoding of meaning is the most famous.

Power, Ideology, and Hegemony

First, however, it is necessary to explain Hall’s view of power, a premise with which all cultural studies critics agree. Hall said that symbols are always associated with power relations, driven by economics, politics, or social discrimination, which determine who is represented and who is not, whose voice is heard and whose is not, what issues are important and what issues are not. Lewis defined power as that which is “considered to be something which enables one person or group to exert their [sic] will and interest over others” (Lewis, 2002, p. 25). Lewis wrote that cultural studies theory
views power as attached to social structures such as class, ethnicity, and gender, or power is concerned with personal manifestations and experiences. He also maintained that power can be mobilized when a viewer chooses to watch a program or not and may also be activated when a person discusses a program with friends or partners.

Power is derived from the dominant ideology of a culture. *Ideology* is defined as:

A set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as ways of perceiving and thinking that are agreed on to the point that they constitute a set of norms for a society that dictate what is desirable and what should be done . . . Ideology contains concepts about what the society in which it exists is actually like. It states or denies, for example, that there are classes and that certain conditions are desirable or more desirable than others. An ideology is also a form of consent to a particular kind of social order and conformity to the rules within a specific set of social, economic, and political structures. It often assigns roles of dominance or subordination to gender, race, sexuality, religion, age, and social groups. (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2006, p. 281)

Related to power is hegemony, defined as a way of life and thought that is dominant in society to the point that it seems natural. Williams wrote that hegemony “is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which . . . even constitutes the substance and limits of common sense for most people under its sway” (in Higgins, p. 113). Hegemony gives closure to meaning, for the meaning is intended to be a dominant one. Hegemony can give power or dominance to one group over another. People in the dominated group consent to be dominated, but the consent is negotiated with ongoing renegotiation and redefinition. The consensus may be broken when the ideologies of the subordinate groups cannot be accommodated.

For the producers of television, consumer satisfaction is important, thus focus groups are used in market research to determine what programs are likely to be successful based on ratings and thus economics. Victoria J. Gallagher wrote that hegemony occurs when “dominant groups control the flow of a cultural projection” (Gallagher, 2004, p. 152). Ideologies in place are presented on television as natural, especially since most creators of television come from a similar economic, social, and educational background. Yet, ideologies are subject to change as shown in television’s growing openness to racial, ethnic, and sexual diversity. Hegemony is a fluid concept compared to coercion and control. Subordinate groups struggle for recognition and to have their voices heard. Some groups have a greater opportunity to do so than
other groups. How groups are represented on television is constantly being redefined and understood. Explaining counterhegemony, Gallagher said that it occurs when “subordinates and their allies convert dominants to subordinate versions of the world. The result of counterhegemony is that many dominants gradually become more accepting of subordinates” (Gallagher, 2004, p. 153). Meanings perceived by viewers of a television program cannot always be predicted. Some may see a program as a reflection of the status quo, while others may perceive it as mockery and satire. Hall recognized that audience members are not passive but rather active consumers who decode symbols and representations and make their own meanings. Hall, in his encoding/decoding model, explains how viewers construct meanings.

**Hall’s Encoding/Decoding Model**

Fundamental to Hall’s work is the encoding process or message formulation in television, together with the social and economic conditions that explain why and how viewers decode or find meaning in a variety of ways. Hall’s model of encoding/decoding is based on the premise that there is a correlation between a person’s social situation and the meanings that person decodes from an encoded symbol (an image/discourse). In other words, there is no single meaning in the image/discourse. If the meaning that the viewer decodes is the same as or similar to the meaning that the television image/discourse encodes, then there would be perfect hegemony. However, if the image/discourse is representative of the dominant ideology and the viewer’s social situation is not, then there is tension resulting in a negotiation between the viewer and image/discourse. In other words, the viewer does not necessarily passively accept the dominant meaning unless it is preferred by the viewer. By preferring a certain meaning, the viewer exercises power in interpreting the image/discourse.

For example, the female forensic scientists on *CSI* and *CSI: New York* are very slender and beautiful, have perfect hairstyles, and wear tight slacks and low-cut camisoles to work. There are a few African American and Hispanic women who work in the laboratories, but all the main female characters are white. *CSI: Miami* features an African American woman (Khandi Alexander) who portrays the coroner, Dr. Alexx Woods. In previous seasons, this show also featured actress Sofia Milos, who played Hispanic Detective Yelina Salas. *CSI: Miami* has had more diversity in its characters, but both these women are thin and gorgeous as well. If the viewer resists these images because their appearances are unrealistic and not very pragmatic in a work situation or because of the lack of diversity, then the viewer experiences a certain power in complaining about them. On the other hand,
if the viewer believes these glamorous images are desirable, the viewer expresses a preference for them and the ideology that reinforces the image of idealized female bodies.

Hall believed that the image/discourse “hails” a person as if it were hail-
ing a taxi. In other words, it calls to the person. To answer the call, the per-
son must recognize that it is she or he, not someone else, who is being hailed. By responding to the call or “hail,” a viewer recognizes the social position that has been constructed in encoding the image/discourse, and if the viewer’s response is cooperative, the intended meaning is adopted, and the viewer has constituted herself or himself as a subject. A subject is a social construction wherein the viewer recognizes that she or he is being addressed or summoned by the hail and decodes the image/discourse accordingly. Thus, television viewers may be hailed as conformists or sexists or patriots or concerned citizens.

Hall named three social positions—dominant, oppositional, and negotiated—although he speculated that there could be multiple positions. The dominant position is decoded by the viewer who accepts the dominant or intended meaning. On the other hand, the oppositional position is in direct opposition to the dominant meaning, and an opposite point of view is decoded. The negotiated position is a completely open category for view-
ers who primarily fit into the dominant ideology but need to resist certain elements of it. Negotiated positions are popular with various social groups who tend to question their relationship to the dominant ideology. Negotiated meanings are what most people get out of television images/dis-
courses most of the time. CSI, for example, consistently gets high ratings, but even faithful viewers question some aspects of the show. Cultural stud-
ies critics can interpret possible decoding positions from their own experi-
ence or derive multiple meanings by analysis. Hall said that we decode by interpreting “from the family in which you were brought up, the places of work, the institutions you belong to, the other practices you do” (Cruz & Lewis, p. 270). Another cultural studies practice is to interview viewers, often over time, to determine how people actively make sense of television images and discourses, social experience, and themselves.

Hall said that we can discover and play with identifications of ourselves, perhaps discovering something of ourselves for the first time. What is impor-
tant to Hall is openness to understanding that what a person thinks one week may change the next. External events like new social movements and cultural differences can change the cultural context and thus both encoding and decoding processes (Morley & Chen, 1996). John Fiske, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, has praised Hall for making us aware that “people are neither cultural dupes nor silenced victims, but are vital,
resilient, varied, contradictory, and as a source of constant contestations of dominance, are a vital social resource, the only one that can fuel social change” (Fiske, 1996, p. 220). Fiske has elaborated on Hall’s model by breaking down the elements of the encoding process, specifically in television production, in his book *Television Culture* (1987), thus giving the television critic another set of categories to examine.

The Codes of Television Production

The term “code” comes from the study of semiotics. A code is a system of signs that is able to communicate meanings. Codes may be simple, as in the case of a STOP sign, or complex as in the case of a language. There are verbal, nonverbal, and representational codes, all of which can operate separately or together to encode meaning. In television studies, code refers to a range of audiovisual systems that have the capability to construct meaning (Casey, Casey, Calvert, French, & Lewis, 2002, p. 27). Fiske regards television as the bearer, provoker, and circulator of meanings and pleasure; echoing Hall, he believes that television is replete with potential meanings. Because a preferred meaning is intended in television production, the conventional codes of culture link the programs and the audience. Fiske defined *code* as “a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared amongst members of a culture, and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture” (Fiske, 1987, p. 4). Fiske organized categories of codes into three levels: reality, representation, and ideology.

1. Reality

Reality is encoded by certain *social codes* that relate to appearance, behavior, speech, sound, and setting. Appearance includes skin color, clothing, hair, makeup, speech, facial expressions, and gestures. Speech includes spoken language, accent, dialect, formal or vernacular style, and paralanguage, such as pitch, rate, and inarticulate utterances. Sound includes natural sounds, such as wind or rain, and artificial sounds, such as sirens or music. Indoor settings may denote place, such as a living room or a hospital. Objects in the place may denote taste or social class, and could promote certain feelings such as comfort or tension. Outdoor settings may suggest peace and tranquility or fear and danger.

Much depends on other codes to encode certain preferred meanings. Some physical behaviors, such as dancing, kissing, shaking hands, playing sports, fighting, and so on, may be easily recognized as such. Others require more contextual information and supplemental codes to provoke meaning.
Clothing can reveal certain personality characteristics such as formality, casualness, and sexuality. Once again, much depends on the other codes as they are put together to form a whole. Obviously, more information is necessary before one can draw conclusions about social codes, and furthermore, different people will interpret these codes in different ways. Social codes, once chosen for a television program, are encoded by representation.

2. Representation

Representation on television is encoded by technical codes with the camera, lighting, sound, music, and editing in order to transmit conventional representational codes, to convey the narrative, conflict, character, action, dialogue, setting, casting, and so forth. The following technical codes, as indicated by Fiske, have been discussed in Chapter 3, “Television Style.” They are vital to representation on television and are suggested here as types of technical codes that function to encode meaning.

Camera use (placement angle, distance, movement, framing, and focus) like other technical codes can be specified by the director in order to achieve desired effects. A close-up, for example, may be used to represent intimacy on one hand or to reveal anxiety by emphasizing a person’s furrowed brow or tears. Lighting changes the way we look at people by the way it is placed, for example, to create shadows across a person’s face or to provide a certain color for special effect. Editing is a powerful way to provide continuity when none exists or to transform time, interaction, and other elements and rhythms. For example, I once appeared on a public television forum about television violence and children with eight other panelists. The moderator spoke at the beginning and then not again for two hours during which the nine panelists discussed the topic while being videotaped. When we finished, the moderator was videotaped, speaking into the camera for about 10 minutes. The final program was edited to appear as if the moderator would ask a question and two or three of the panelists would respond to it. The moderator appeared to be chairing a panel discussion. The responses had been carefully edited to fit the moderator’s questions.

Sound and music create mood, attitude, and other various emotions. Music is also thematic and can suggest a program and various characters. It is important to recognize the role that technical codes play in encoding meaning.

Representational codes have to work together to encode a preferred meaning and to appear natural at the same time. A script provides the setting, narrative, conflict, action, dialogue, and characters, but the actors who are cast in various roles bring the characters and the plot to life. Casting of
characters is complex because actors are real people whom viewers may know in other contexts, for example from films, talk shows, magazines, and so on. Certain actors bring with them other intertextual meanings from their very public lives.

The social codes (in *Reality*) play a large part in conveying conventional representational codes. Appearance, speech, sound, facial expressions, and gestures in a contemporary setting have to be consistent with what viewers know in their own culture. Narratives set in other cultures or time periods also have to convey a sense of naturalness, but even in these instances social codes are usually adapted to the culture of the present. For example, on American television, a program set in France will most likely have the dialogue spoken in English. The most striking example of adaptation to the present was on *M*A*S*H*, which had a narrative based on the Korean War, but because the show was on from 1972 to 1983, it had more to do with the Vietnam War than the Korean War. Other cultural codes may be more deeply embedded in representation. Fiske refers to these in level 3 as *Ideology*.

### 3. Ideology

Representational codes are organized into coherence and social acceptability by ideological codes, such as individualism, patriarchy, class, materialism, capitalism, and so on. All the codes come together to encode a preferred meaning that supports a certain ideology. Fiske maintains that a patriarchal code is embedded in the dialogue when a woman asks questions and a man answers them, seemingly because the man is supposed to be more knowledgeable than the woman. More broadly, on crime series when the criminal is caught and imprisoned, the ideology of law and order is coded. On the news, the stock market report is a code for the ideology of capitalism. Gans wrote that the daily reports of the Dow Jones Index are an indicator of the primacy of business, but there is no daily report of fluctuations in the prices of basic foods, and no one reports news about wages and salaries of workers (Gans, 2003). There is no guarantee that a different cultural analyst will make the same meanings or even find ideology at all. Viewers who occupy different social positions may interpret the representation as something altogether different. The process of interpretation and finding meaning gives the viewer a certain kind of pleasure in decoding.

### Decoding and Pleasure

Fiske said that a viewer not only decodes meanings but also derives pleasure from the process. Pleasure can be derived from opposing the preferred
meaning or negotiating an individual meaning or accepting the preferred or dominant meaning. Experiencing pleasure in one of these ways frees the viewers from ideological dominance and gives them a sense of control over the production of meanings. Fiske wrote:

> Pleasure for the subordinate is produced by the assertion of one’s social identity in resistance to, in independence of, or in negotiation with, the structure of domination. There is . . . real pleasure to be found in, for example, soap operas that assert the legitimacy of feminine meanings and identities within and against patriarchy. Pleasure results from the production of meanings of the world and of self that are felt to serve the interests of the viewer rather than those of the dominant . . . Pleasure requires a sense of control over meanings and an active participation in the cultural process. (Fiske, 1987, p. 19)

A viewer may experience pleasure in the validation of his or her social identity from accepting the dominant meaning. There may also be a form of pleasure in negotiating meaning in a person’s own terms. Pleasure can even be derived from resisting the dominant meaning; as Fiske wrote, “By maintaining one’s social identity in opposition to that proposed by the dominant ideology, there is a power in asserting one’s own subcultural values against the dominant ones” (Fiske, 1987, p. 19).

The concept of pleasure is another indicator that viewers make active choices regarding the meanings they decode. People make their own sense out of what they see, and the sense they make is related to a pattern of choices about their own social identities. This is one of the reasons for television’s popularity, said Fiske, because it offers “such a variety of pleasures to such a heterogeneity of viewers” (Fiske, 1987, pp. 19–20). This enables the viewers to actively participate in culture, which has a social system that can be held in place only by the meanings that people make of it.

To paraphrase Fiske regarding the pleasure of watching television, viewers play a text the way a musician plays a score, by interpreting it, activating it, and giving it a living presence. A television critic can do the same, and that gives much pleasure, too.

**Summary**

Both rhetoric and culture are interdisciplinary subjects based on various and complex ideas. This chapter has introduced some of the well-known aspects of both. Each of these subjects is worthy of an entire book or several books, and it would be unworthy reductionism to combine them. Rhetoric and cultural studies both have methodological fluidity and can be used in different
forms to criticize television discourse. Rhetoric examines the available means of persuasion and information and how they work; cultural studies analyzes the production and exchange of strands of meanings and how they relate to social practices. There are areas where rhetoric and cultural studies intersect:

1. Rhetoric examines attributed intention; cultural studies analyzes the preferred meaning. These may not always be the same, but the preferred meaning can be an intentional one.

2. Rhetoric, as Rosteck has said, analyzes how discourse is produced, what it is, and what it does; cultural studies examines the codes of television involved in its production and generation of ideology.

3. Rhetoric is about the choices that the developer of discourse makes and the choices that a viewer makes in treating the discourse as a message; cultural studies is about the choices made in encoding and decoding meaning.

4. Rhetoric and cultural studies both link discourse to an audience, to society, and especially to context.

5. Cultural studies is about how ideology shapes a work; rhetoric is about how a work stems from and influences ideology.

6. Identification is a key factor in persuasion, and how one’s identity is known through the decoding process is a key factor in cultural studies. The substance through which people rhetorically identify may be the same substance that marks identity in cultural studies, for example, nationality, class, gender, race, occupation, beliefs, and values.

7. Cultural studies examines polysemy, the multiple meanings that can be made by viewers from television discourse; rhetoric examines how a sender and receiver co-create meaning.

8. Both subjects focus on symbols and emphasize that meanings do not reside in the symbols themselves but in the people who encode them.

9. Values as foundations for persuasion may be studied in rhetoric; cultural studies analyze the ideology in discourse. Ideology is comprised in part of values.

10. Rhetoric is used to bring about change and enlightenment; cultural studies is about the lives of everyday people and how culture interacts with their lives.

Television rhetoric was defined as the study of technologically enhanced symbol systems and representations through which the senders (television
producers, writers, directors, actors, cinematographers, set designers, and so on) attempt to shape perceptions, foster understanding, create identification, and influence the viewing behavior of the receivers (the television audience). Cultural studies has been presented as a way to demystify what attitudes, beliefs, values, preferred forms of conduct, and ideologies are embedded and reinforced in images and supporting discourse. Both approaches are of great value to the television critic and can be adapted as questions to ask when conducting a critique.

**Exercises**

1. Watch an episode of *CSI* and observe how the forensic scientists use evidence and artistic and inartistic proofs to locate the criminal.

2. Find and describe an enthymeme in a television commercial. What did you have to supply to complete the reasoning?

3. Is there anything on television that emphasizes *telos*, the movement toward moral excellence?

4. Find attributed intentionality in a television drama or situation comedy or in the news.

5. Select a television program that you frequently watch and describe the character with whom you identify. Analyze why you identify with this character.

6. Give an example of how a television program engages in courtship with you as a viewer. What desire does it arouse and satisfy?

7. Cite some examples from recent television shows and commercials that use language that has found its way into popular usage.

8. Select a scene from a television drama and analyze its polysemy.

9. Select a soap opera or a nighttime drama and tell how it relates to the shared conditions of our time.

10. Select a television show and examine the codes described by Fiske—reality, representation, and ideology.

11. Describe an instance in which a television show “hails” you and tell how you answer it.

12. Describe how hegemony has occurred for a disempowered group that has recently been represented on television.

13. By playing with meanings that you make from television, tell what you have learned about yourself in the process.
Suggested Readings in Rhetoric


Suggested Readings in Cultural Studies


