

Teens, Sex, and Media

The Influence of Electronic Entertainment on American Teen Sexual Culture: A

Reason to Revive Rhetoric in English Teacher Education Programs

By Eileen M. Hart, M.A.

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Introduction

The influence of mass media entertainment on American teen sexual culture justifies teaching rhetorical theory in English education to prepare K-12 educators to facilitate students' evaluations of complex electronic media messages. Sexual content in entertainment messages – especially in electronic media such as movies and television that combine multi – sensory stimuli with relaxed, non-critical viewing – strongly correlates with negative teen behaviors that result in teen pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS. My hypothesis is that teaching rhetoric in English education will enable pre-service teachers to enhance K-12 students' critical awareness of mass media content and its influence.

I chose the issue of teen sexuality, to ground my proposal for rhetorical education, because it is an issue that concerns educators, parents, and common citizens across the American political spectrum. Conservatives, moderates, and liberals may find some common ground in the need to address the negative consequences associated with teen sexual behaviors. While I will focus on the influence of electronic entertainment media on teen sexual culture, two important factors expanded the content of this thesis and influenced the focus of my research. The first factor is a burgeoning, multi-disciplinary, multi-ideological educational movement promoting K-12 media literacy

education. The second factor is a common perspective among many academic scholars and researchers that mass media influence threatens not only American culture, but cultures around the globe. Based on these discoveries, I expanded my research beyond academic perspectives of entertainment's influence on teen sexual culture to include the interconnected influences of entertainment and communication technology on society. These issues historically situate rhetorical theory and justify its role in K-12 media literacy education. Rhetorical education at the academic level can ground media literacy in the core-subject of English and at the same time incorporate competing cross-disciplinary research perspectives that reflect polarized political and ideological differences on mass media related issues such as government regulation and consumer advocacy.

This thesis is divided into six sections. The first section, [Mass Media Influence on Teen Sexual Culture](#), summarizes current academic and non-academic perspectives of the correlation between sexual content in mass media messages and teen behaviors. The second section, [Academic Research Perspectives](#), reviews multi-disciplinary resources that inform the mass media influence debate. This academic scholarship is grounded in the history of technology's influence on communication ([Under the Influence of Technology: The History of Mass Communications](#)) and is situated in the current debate regarding the broad influence of mass media monopoly on society ([Under the Influence of Mass Media: Democratic Discourse in the New Millennium](#)).

The fifth section, [Solutions to Mass Media Influence: The Politics of Education](#), briefly reviews polarized political solutions that address mass media influence and then focuses on the less politically-charged solution of media literacy education. This section explains my proposal to facilitate interdisciplinary multimedia literacy study by reviving rhetoric in English education. The

sixth section, [Rhetoric in Education](#), details my proposal for a simplified, student-centered approach to rhetoric in media literacy education. Using theories from Aristotle and Burke, I rhetorically critique two teen-targeted movies to explore embedded persuasive messages in electronic entertainment media. The [Conclusion](#) focuses on the urgent need for this type of rhetorical theory to address mass media influence on teen sexual culture (as well as global society) by providing students with critical interpretation and communication skills in multimedia environments.

This thesis does not review current marketing research strategies and audience analysis techniques that mass media producers use to develop both advertising and entertainment. It does not include psychological and physiological testing of audience responses or the detailed “science” of audience demographics. It is interesting to see how mass media moguls target “tweens” – the 10-15 year olds who not only purchase movie tickets, toys, and music, but who also influence their parents’ purchases of today and who will become big-ticket consumers of tomorrow. However, including that information would have made this thesis too cumbersome.

For the same reason, this thesis does not include the vast amount of research studying the correlation of media violence with violence in society. Not only is this issue much broader in scope than media influence on teen sexual culture, it is also much more politically polarized and hotly debated.

Definition of Terms

Mass Media: for the purpose of this thesis, Mass Media refers to “print media (newspaper[s], magazines, books), the electronic media (radio, television, movies, and music), and the new media (computer-mediated communication)” (Carstarphen and Zavoina, xi).

Media Education: in the United States this term is often used to refer to teaching students to use technology (media) resources. For this reason, American scholars and educators, use the term Media Literacy.

Media Literacy: is “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms” (Hobbs, “Media Literacy” 127).

Media Literacy Education: For the purpose of clarity, I use this term to refer to K-12 instruction in Media Literacy.

Teens: unless specifically defined by researchers, the terms *teens*, *adolescents*, and *youth* are often used interchangeably. I use the term “teen” to refer to young people who would typically be students in middle school or high school.

Mass Media Influence on Teen Sexual Culture

Teen sex is a “major public health problem” according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP “Sexuality”). The physical, emotional, and social consequences of teen sexual activity include high rates of teen pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS. Each year 25% of sexually active teenagers contract a sexually transmitted disease (STD), and the younger a female is when she first has sex, the more likely it is that she will have “involuntary or forced” sex (AAP “Sexuality”). Many health professionals believe that mass media content depicting casual sex with no consequences has resulted in a host of negative behaviors among teens who may be persuaded that teen sexual activity is “both acceptable and wide spread” (Villaruel). Pediatric healthcare providers are being encouraged to assess patients’ media use because of its

potential association with unhealthy behaviors (Gruber and Grube). Although parents and educators try to promote abstinence or condom use, teens are increasingly exposed to media sexual content that does not provide information about health risks and personal responsibility. Both negative and positive advertising messages have been shown to influence young people, according to a pediatric medical association that calls on the mass media to promote responsible sex, and healthy behaviors (AAP “Sexuality”).

In addition to modeling unhealthy sexual behaviors, entertainment may negatively influence other aspects of teens’ physical and psychological well-being. Research suggests that media portrayals of unrealistic body images negatively impact teens’ self-esteem (Polce-Lynch). Teens, especially young females, become discontent with their bodies and may develop unhealthy eating behaviors in an attempt to achieve media-ideal body types (Field et al.). Although family and social relationships also have an influence, teens learn about society and sexual relationships from visual media images portraying body types, clothing, and other cultural norms (Johnston 10).

Sexual content in mass media has a “profound real-life effect” according to researchers who point to the co-evolution of media messages and sexual culture in American society (Carpenter). Mass media can either reinforce norms or offer insights into alternative ways of thinking. Entertainment content depicting sexual norms, stereotypes, double-standards, and sexual roles may have a profound influence on teens’ perceptions about sex, body image, and social norms (Ward). Teens often seek social and sexual information from mass media sources rather than their parents or other adults. These teens may be attracted to programs with sexual content. In a study of prime-time television shows popular among young viewers, sexual references

accounted for as much as 50% of character interactions. These programs typically depicted sex as a “recreational” pursuit rather than something pertaining to relationships or reproduction, and the sexual content reinforced gender stereotypes of men as aggressors, and women as sexual objects who are valued for their physical appearances (Ward).

According to two scholars who reviewed a number of studies, research implies that: teens who watch sexual content on television are more likely to engage in sex; teens who watch a lot of television tend to have negative attitudes about being a virgin; and teens who see sexual content as being more real are more impacted by the sexual content. Age and gender may also influence how teens select media, according to one study that found older teens were more likely to tune in to sexual content, and that females were more likely to learn about sex and relationships from sexual content in the media (Greenburg and Hofschire 103-104).

Music Television (MTV) is another example of electronic media programming that barrages teens with sexual messages. From the beginning, MTV transformed music into television programming by using fast-paced visuals to grab the attention of a very specific youthful audience – a new generation that had been raised with television and had different ways of processing information (Sherman and Etling 378). In order to make the aural and visual elements fit together, music video producers and directors, rather than entertainers and writers, control visual images that may have nothing to do with the musicians’ or artists’ original concepts (Sherman and Etling 379). MTV became a programmer’s dream of non-stop commercial television that changed the way people hear popular music and how they see the meanings that are embedded in the music content (Sut Jhally, “Intersections of Discourse” 151).

Teens report that they watch MTV because it helps them to understand the songs better, and to understand what the music is about. However, the content that the teens are tuning into is more than 75% sexual, with stereotypical portrayals of males and females (Greenburg and Hofschire 104). MTV uses sexual images of women through “short, sharp, shots of intense visual pleasure” to encourage viewers to watch closely and stay focused so that they do not miss anything (Sut Jhally “Intersections of Discourse” 153). Camera angles and other production techniques in MTV videos depict women in violent scenes and women giving ambiguous yes/no signals (Sut Jhally “Intersections of Discourse” 153). Visual images in videos are sexual even when the lyrics are not, according to researchers who say that “sex sells, in music videos and elsewhere” (Arnett 251). Some media effects researchers believe MTV sexual content influences how viewers perceive sex and sexual behaviors in society (Greenburg and Hofschire 105). Music videos that depict gender stereotypes and recreational sex without consequences influence teens’ identity formation by modeling the world through these images (Arnett 261.)

A startling view of how entertainment content may influence sexual attitudes comes from a review of the 1984 US Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography. According to two researchers, whose studies were “cited throughout the two-volume work,” the large government study condemned pornography, but failed to reveal that violent content, rather than explicit sexual content, was shown to have a greater impact on adult males’ attitudes toward rape and sexual aggression (Donnerstein and Linz). In controlled studies, males who were shown pornographic sex without violence had more *negative* attitudes toward rape than males who were shown violence without sex. These findings directly relate to teens, and others, who typically watch television and

non-X-rated movies. The prevalence of violence – even without sex – in mass media entertainment, according to the researchers, can contribute to more sexually aggressive attitudes among viewers (Donnerstein and Linz).

Despite myriad concerns over entertainment’s influence on teens, some researchers argue that there is insufficient evidence of a causal relationship. They assert that studies demonstrating a correlation between sexual content in entertainment and teen sexual behaviors do not prove whether sexually active teens watch more sex or whether watching more sex encourages teens to be sexually active. These researchers take a broader perspective of media influence on teen sexual culture, going beyond content and effects, to see how individual characteristics of ethnicity, gender, developmental stage, and socio-economic class influence teens’ media use and the incorporation of media ideas into teens’ daily lives (Steele). These researchers situate media influence on teen sexuality in the context of family, friends, school and other social situations that provide information and influence teens’ sexual perceptions. For example, early sexual experience is associated with lack of parental involvement, and beliefs that other teens are sexually active, while mitigating factors include parental involvement and teen participation in social activities that do not provide sexual opportunities. This interactive association is further influenced by individual predictive factors such as onset of physical maturity (Rosenthal). According to these researchers, teens select and use media messages either to socially reproduce media images by following the status quo, or to socially resist media images by finding and following examples of alternative behavior (Steele).

While many parents, educators, activists, and health professionals are working on solutions based on the perception that media sexual content influences teen audiences, researchers who view

media influence in this complicated, contextualized perspective call for long-term media use studies to determine the actual influence of media on teen sexual culture (Rosenthal). Academic researchers provide multiple perspectives, theories, and data that contribute to this media influence debate, sometimes facilitating progress, and sometimes the opposite.

Academic Research Perspectives

Multiple academic disciplines including cultural studies, mass communications, communications science, psychology, linguistics, and English contribute to media influence research. These disciplines draw on various educational philosophies and myriad other political and social ideologies that inform research on message effects, content analysis, semiotics, audience analysis, and audience practice. The following review begins with two broad overviews of research evolution that provide a background for understanding competing perspectives among and within individual disciplinary areas of academic research on media influence.

In the first overview, two scholars systematically condemn research perspectives that differ from their own. Blackman and Walkerdine, who incorporate psychology with media and cultural studies, criticize research which focuses on audiences as receivers of media influences because this model does not address the complicated interplay of audiences, embedded meanings, language and other social forces (12). Audience effect studies, according to these researchers, are often based on traditional psychology that sees itself as a means of controlling masses of people in society. Blackman and Walkerdine note Marxism's similar flaw of seeing mass audience as a victim (36-41). These theorists criticize experimental and correlational research that studies media exposure

and content because this research cannot measure social influences and interactions (43).

According to Blackman and Walkerdine, “uses and gratifications” research, that views audiences as homogeneous masses and ignores individuals’ differences such as gender, has yielded to new research methods that focus on active audiences that select and interact with media. The active audiences, in these studies, do not simply absorb media content but instead negotiate meaning (49-52). These critics suggest that media and cultural studies are based on psychology and that the “‘active audience’ is very much a reaction against the idea that the media have the power to manipulate the ‘masses’” (57). They cite the influence of psychoanalysis on *Screen* theory which resulted in an objectified, vulnerable audience. According to Blackman and Walkerdine, cultural theorists were dissatisfied because even though students could identify message intent, that awareness did not prevent those students from admiring and enjoying the messages (77). They point out that psychoanalysis was also incorporated in the feminist movement which focused on consciousness raising, though it was still mass mind oriented (79). Blackman and Walkerdine conclude their history of the evolution of audience research by praising the postmodern, post-structuralist concepts of Lacan, Baudrillard, Lyotard, and others who influenced media study away from the mass audience focus (94-99).

Blackman and Walkerdine are extremely critical and limited in their approach to the media influence debate. They are representative of researchers who appear to reject the notion that the mass media play a very significant role in shaping the knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes of audiences and society. By arguing against studying the audience as subject they negate a large amount of research that could contribute to real-world solutions outside of the realm of academic research and

politically-motivated disciplinary wars.

A more positive perspective of the evolution of audience research is provided by two cultural studies researchers, Cruz and Lewis, who see its interconnection with political and social activities as “cross-disciplinary convergences among the social sciences and humanities” that allow scholars to get beyond the boundaries of their academic disciplines (Introduction 1). “[T]he scramble for interdisciplinarity is symptomatic of a crisis in the politics of knowledge after poststructuralism,” according to Cruz and Lewis, who cite the common influence of postmodernism on English, cultural studies, and other fields (Introduction 2). Cruz and Lewis are optimistic about research progress. They explain that reception theory, informed by Marxism, saw audiences as an influencable mass until structuralism and semiotics modified this thinking with a focus on symbolic systems that provided a way of analyzing language, signs, symbols and social contexts within a system. Cruz and Lewis praise Saussure, Levi-Strauss, and others who developed semiotic theory to view the way culture functions similarly to language. According to Cruz and Lewis, semiotics, structuralism, and post-structuralism opened up the meaning-making activities of audiences, and postmodernism influenced audience studies by looking at the everyday lives of individuals as well as social and institutional structures (Introduction 3-5). They explain that post-structuralism, semiology, and pscho-analytic theories were applied to media study in *Screen* and *Screen Education*, while “uses and gratifications” research began looking at audiences as selective individuals who were in control of their own consumption. Feminist theory introduced individual experience and social influences that led to further study of the way culture and social forces interact, while literary theory and textual interpretation shifted meaning-making to readers and to

audiences. These similarities in the evolution of theory, Cruz and Lewis note, highlight important connections between literary theory and cultural theory (9-10).

Cruz and Lewis, unlike Blackman and Walkerdine, open the possibilities of interdisciplinary sharing by seeing common trends in research and respecting the strengths and limitations of competing theories and ideologies. According to Cruz and Lewis, the political right has two perspectives: choice enforced by audience dollars, or media influenced erosion of morals in society. The political left also has two perspectives: the media as a potent influence on culture and society, or empowerment of audiences made up of different individuals (Introduction 9). Cruz and Lewis understand that ideological differences in cross-disciplinary perspectives enrich research and provide insights into the media influence debate.

Cultural studies researchers, such as Cruz and Lewis, contribute to the media influence debate by looking at politics, ideology, and psychology to evaluate the interactions of media and culture. Some cultural studies researchers are concerned with the social construction of culture through the normalization of behaviors characterized in media. Average students, for example, watch 5,000 hours of television before they ever get to school, so they may not recognize media bias about race, economics, gender, politics, and morals (Semali "Implementing" 278-83). According to some researchers, cultural studies methods have evolved from reception research and audience ethnography to social construction (Alasuutari Introduction 3-6). Cultural studies research has moved from audience "uses and gratifications" and "mass culture" to perspectives of the interactions among audiences, media, and culture (Bielby and Harrington 81). Feminist and post-structuralist theory influenced cultural studies perspectives of socially situated audiences within

the power and dominance issues related to media messages, according to these researchers, so that “scholars no longer presume that the preferred readings of television producers are monolithically transcribed to the psyches of viewers who are indistinguishable from one another” (Bielby and Harrington 82). This perspective of cultural studies research uses audience engagement and interaction as media practice to evaluate beyond message, or message reception, and look more deeply at the individual and the individual’s empowerment of choosing how to interact with the medium of television (Lembo 50-51).

Some researchers in the field of psychology argue that the mass media have a strong influence on audiences. From psychological processes perspectives, “the media are instrumental in developing the constructs that are available in memory, and in determining which of those constructs are chronically accessible” (Sanbonmatsu and Fazio 57). According to some psychology researchers, this concept of construct accessibility helps to explain the media process because ideas work on “associations in memory” and media messages influence the basic constructs that impact how viewers see their social world and society (Sanbonmatsu and Fazio 57). These researchers explain that construct accessibility might cause viewers who have seen a negative portrayal of police in recent entertainment to have a negative image of a recent real-life police incident. Psychology process researchers also note the influence of message contexts on message interpretation. What comes before and after a message influences how viewers perceive the message. Researchers explain that the concept of message context is the reason why advertisers do not place commercials next to news stories that might cause unfavorable associations with the advertised products or companies. According to these researchers, viewers react negatively when they sense they are

being manipulated, but audiences usually do not notice the controlling influence of messages that are placed adjacent to content. Media programmers are thus able to manipulate what is “accessible in memory” by controlling message contexts (Sanbonmatsu and Fazio 57-58).

Other researchers in psychology suggest that personality types should be included in media study so that researchers can better understand the influences involved between personality and media choice. For example, extroverts self-report that television does not substitute for other social contacts, while neurotic people see television as a way of passing time and having companionship. New technologies also may be used differently as extroverts may find computer interactions limiting of social contact, while neurotics may seek out social safety where they have control over the Internet (Weaver 244-45).

Perspectives of viewer personality may impact other psychology research that looks at the cultivation paradigm. Cultivation researchers find, for example, that soap opera viewers (as compared to non-viewers) believe that society has higher rates of abortion, divorce, and extra-marital affairs. Researchers also find that adolescent soap viewers are less likely to be concerned about pregnancies, STDs, and practicing safe sex. These researchers explain that since content analysis shows a high incidence of portrayals of unmarried sex on soap operas, there is reason to consider the cultivation hypothesis (Greenburg and Hofschire 97).

Communications research perspectives of audiences, according to one researcher, can typically be grouped in one of three categories: structural (measures media influence on audiences), behavioral (analyzes choices of decision-making audiences), and cultural (focuses on media used in cultural contexts) (McQuayle 18). Communications researchers using social judgment theory look

at how the media are able to influence culture by getting people to buy into images to see themselves and others in particular ways. People “design or constrain [their] futures” based on their acceptance of meanings that are below the surface in media “archetypes, symbols, and images” (Johnston 10-11). Other communication scholars focus on message content evaluation, according to one researcher who states that while social psychologists are primarily concerned with social knowledge, and linguists with symbolic structures, communication scientists are concerned with the ways in which symbols affect social knowledge and vice versa (Bradac, Preface 7-8). Despite disciplinary separations, some researchers find that various other disciplines have enriched communication science with multiple political, social, and cultural perspectives (Mulac and Kunkel 52-53). Rhetorical criticism, according to one scholar, provides methods to incorporate “identification and alienation” into communication theory (Bowers 16). Another scholar suggests that communications research is enhanced by interdisciplinary perspectives including rhetoric and linguistics (Redding 347).

Linguistic research perspectives see language as a signifying system that is constitutive of all knowledge so that thinking is constrained by language. For example, a language that uses only two words – black and white – for all colors, provides different possibilities of thinking and communicating than a language that has many words to describe colors (Gee). Linguistic research in semiotics looks at how visual signs, rather than language and the spoken word alone, influence the way people construct thoughts. Semiotics looks at rapid-pace, multi-media images that viewers pick up on and make meaning of, oftentimes without thinking or questioning.

Some linguistic researchers see semiology as a way of looking at how meaning is negotiated

when message content interacts with viewer identity and socialization factors. For these researchers, semiology finds ambiguity to be inherent in all communication because there is always the potential for multiple interpretations or *polysemy*. Linguistic researchers note that in the “extravagantly coded” messages of television, in which even a close-up shot can signify a meaning, research that focuses on shared meanings loses sight of potential ambiguity. These linguists point out that ambiguous programs can be just as “manipulative” as unambiguous programs (Lewis 26-31). If a television program, for example, is able to allow different audiences different interpretations of ambiguous messages, the ambiguity within the broadcast content makes the program more influential because “it demonstrates its potency in a variety of cultural contexts” (Lewis 28).

Comparative media theory also views the success of polysemy in mass media messages that do not have to be received in unison by an audience in order to be effective. Audiences are not empowered just because they have different interpretations of messages, according to one theorist who states that seeing the audience as interactive and choice-making ignores the way audiences are being kept from responding in a democratic way (Angus 234-39). According to this researcher, the very medium of television itself reinforces the mass audience and prevents a balanced communication structure that permits “reciprocity” in democratic discourse (Angus 249-50).

It is difficult to discuss media influence research without addressing the issue of media control of public information that restricts democratic discourse in the United States and globally. Many academics, regardless of their political ideologies, are concerned with responding to media influences that limit free speech and free thought. These academic researchers offer insights into the

issue of media influence, not only on American teen sexual culture, but also on cultures around the globe. Academic research perspectives of media influence are grounded in the history of mass communications technology and the struggle to control its influence on society.

Under the Influence of Technology: The History of Mass Communications

Communication technology has had an enormous impact on society by changing the distribution of information and assimilation of knowledge. Communication technology has facilitated the evolution of “entertainment” that has reinforced or challenged societal norms since bards entertained audiences by reciting epic poems and oral histories (Zillmann 10). From the time of ancient Greece, linear print technology (alphabets) has altered oral practices and dramatically expanded the capabilities of language by preserving written records of thoughts and ideas (Ong 8). Many centuries after writing was invented, the technology of the printing press enabled the first mass distribution of books, pamphlets, and newspapers that allowed single authors to inform and entertain large audiences.

In what was to become the United States of America, public discourse, facilitated by print technology, argued for democratic freedoms from government tyranny and fueled the fight for American independence (Lucas). In the newly established democracy, “freedom of the press” protections guaranteed that print media sources would continue providing information and influence. These protections were invoked, later in American history, when debates raged over the power and influence of new mass communications technologies.

By the turn of the 20th century, electronic technology was at the center of American political

and social power struggles over entertainment's ability to propagandize masses of people in society. From the time movie technology first appeared in 1894, censorship proponents sought to limit criminal and sexual content while other groups proposed using the new medium to teach social ideology (Spring 13). As early as the 1920's, movies were blamed for increasing youth sexuality. Movies were seen as reality-makers that clashed with values taught in school and contradicted societal norms. Studies during that time revealed that high school and college students were learning (and practicing) sexual techniques they had seen in the movies. Although censorship in the 1930s curbed sexual content in film, off-screen Hollywood sexual culture continued to influence American youth culture (Spring 67- 69).

The mass medium of movies was seen as a vehicle to propagandize audiences with entertainment messages. In 1943, Elmer Davis, who was then America's Director of the Office of War Information, stated: "The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people's minds is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized" (Spring 137). The mass audience reach of movies made them a battleground for numerous entities who wanted to promote a host of political and social agendas.

Commercial interests soon became a major participant in the battle to wield mass media power in both entertainment and news. Despite economic and political influences, radio broadcasters attempted to create a perception of neutral and non-biased news reporting, and Americans began to rely on commercial radio as their primary source of news and information (Spring 139). After commercial interests won control over radio in the 1920s, broadcasting began to create a national culture for shared consumerism (Spring 98-109). Although 1930s and '40s

mass media images emphasized political rights and freedoms of speech, by the 1950s television stations did not want to air any content that would create controversy and affect advertising dollars (Spring 183). In 1951, in order to avoid government censorship, the television industry's National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) adopted a code of self-censorship that created a proper moral image for television. However, advertisers soon became the greatest source of television censorship as advertising agencies for companies such as Procter & Gamble sought programming content that presented positive business images (Spring 164-65).

By the 1960s, communications scholar Marshall McLuhan envisioned a shift away from the linear organization of print media to the orality of television that he believed would revive oral communication as the basis for knowledge and knowing (113). Television's high visual and audio impact, according to McLuhan, established new ways of meaning-making that reconnected viewers to the roots of oral communication (8). McLuhan anticipated electronic technology's potential to influence every facet of personal and public experience with fast-action, multi-sensory images that communicate more than many words (26, 157).

In the battle over media influence, movies and television have been, and continue to be, perceived as more powerful than print media. In the early days of film, movie theaters were not permitted to show news reels of certain volatile stories – such as violent labor disputes between union members and industry owners – that newspapers were free to cover (Spring 16). Although a Supreme Court ruling in the 1950s included movies under the free speech and free press protections of the First and Fourteenth Amendments, even today, cigarette and liquor advertisements are banned from television but not from newspapers and magazines (Spring 162).

The television medium became central in the power struggle to influence mass media content. Although commercial interests dominated television broadcasting, special-interest groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) began challenging stations that did not give balanced treatment to certain issues. In 1966, the U.S. court of appeals ordered the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to include more public input in licensing hearings, thus giving women and minority organizations the ability to advocate their agendas (Spring 216-217).

The struggle over media influence has included “government, private enterprise, advocacy groups, and, in more recent years, philanthropic foundations”(Spring 251). In 1967, the Carnegie Commission proposed establishing the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Foundations, and activists working in government and education, created the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in an effort to shape a more intellectual culture (Spring 233, 250).

The issue of commercialized media continues to be at the forefront of debates over mass media influence on culture. The evolution of communication technology has enabled fewer and fewer people to have greater and greater control over the distribution of information and entertainment. Both conservative and liberal scholars, educators, and activists are concerned with the mass media’s ability to limit democratic discourse and propagandize through entertainment messages. Their perspectives inform potential solutions for mitigating the influence of mass media on American teen sexual culture.

Under the Influence of Mass Media: Democratic Discourse in the New Millennium

A specter now haunts the world: a global commercial media system dominated by a small number of superpowerful, mostly U.S.A.-based transnational media corporations. It is a system that works to advance the cause of the global market and promote commercial values, while denigrating journalism and culture not conducive to the immediate bottom-line or long-term corporate interests. It is a disaster for anything but the most superficial notion of democracy (McChesney 59).

Through recent mergers, corporations have restructured media information sources into powerful global entities (Andersen, Introduction 9). Nine giant firms control the global media system including much of the Internet that was seen by some activists as a way to offset the globalization of media monopoly (McChesney 60-61). Merging media conglomerates are gaining increasing control over information as large corporations buy up small companies that fit with other corporate holdings (McAllister 109). Global media ownership takes power away from small, local news outlets and puts it in the hands of large corporations. Corporations that control mass media entertainment, news, and advertising are better able to manage information than many totalitarian governments (Parker 324). Corporate ownership has given mass media global reach that would be envied by anyone who wanted to limit free exchange of information in order to indoctrinate, propagandize, and control the thoughts of people in society. The successful propaganda of today's corporations goes unchallenged because media ownership "is based on a symbiotic relationship

with a handful of media moguls like Disney, America on-Line/Time Warner, News Corp., and Viacom-CBS” (Johnston, xi).

Corporations, with complete control over media news and information, have a considerable impact on free democracy (Andersen, *Critical Studies* 8). In an ideal democracy, all voices, not just those of the rich and powerful, should be heard. Media moguls’ monopolization of ideology, social culture, and the information that establishes these, interferes with democratic freedom of speech. American democracy depends on open debate and freedom of information that informs its “citizens who act to set the tone for the culture and the nation, through their votes, their opinions expressed in polls, their priorities expressed in how they spend money, and through their advocacy for or against issues” (Johnston 159). Mass media interferes with this process by determining what gets discussed, what gets reported, and what is meaningful (Angus 234). In government and society, democracy requires two-way discourse so that audiences are not just receivers but responders (Angus 233). Americans tend to spend more time with mass media in their homes which further diminishes democracy by limiting discourse in public and private spaces (Postman 52).

Media moguls control government through what one author calls “‘corpocracy’-defacto government by mega corporations” (Johnston xi). In the United States, and in other countries around the world, people are often ignorant about media propaganda. Entertainment and news broadcasts are continually influencing a public that believes it is not being influenced (Johnston xi-xii). People rarely consider what is put in by the media and what is “screened out” (Johnston 8). One scholar compares “corporate moguls peddling cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and automobiles”

to “Hitler, Mussolini, Hirohito, and Stalin,” saying that “people today do not realize they are being programmed any more than did the people of Germany, Italy, Japan, and, later the Soviet Union” (Johnston xi). Current mass media ownership allows mega-corporations to manipulate information to promote political and social agendas that enhance corporate bottom-lines. Corporations are places of power where money and influence have instituted an unelected authority through which profiteers who control the global media grow richer and thus more powerful as they influence consumer buying (Johnston xi).

Mass media have fostered a shared consumer identity through which we accept rather than debate what is happening in our world. Media-nurtured consumer culture encourages people to identify with media images, and to buy products to fit their media-based self-identities. This encourages individuals to identify with symbols such as brands of clothing, genres of music, and hairstyles that can unite diverse perspectives under a presumption of shared ideology. Corporations, such as General Motors, may capitalize on American symbolism – baseball, hotdogs, apple-pie, etc. – by advertising automobile ownership through standardized social conceptions. Symbolism not only stifles true social diversity, it helps stifle political diversity as well. Political symbols can create perceptions of unity that divert attention from the lack of information on truly diverse perspectives. Too often, the sides with wealth, power, and influence are dead-locked in bipartisan political conflict that excludes multi-faceted viewpoints. The general public is encouraged to buy into political symbolism. Those who do not choose one side or the other are excluded in a voiceless void that pretends there are no alternate solutions – possibly because the issues are too complex for non-experts to understand. Conflict without communication offers no hope of

mediated solutions, only backroom deals that exclude the diverse voices of ‘we the people’ who theoretically participate in American democracy.

When Americans buy products that are manufactured in countries that do not have American labor and environmental restrictions, corporations are able to maximize profits rather than ensure human safety and dignity or to protect the environment. By buying into a culture of consumerism that supports corporate profit, Americans widen the void between prosperous and poor both in the United States and around the world. The impact of corporate-sponsored consumerism on global conditions of war, poverty, disease, and hunger is eclipsed by a corporate-run mass media that distracts attention from social and political issues and provides a corporate-biased view of information. Mass media-fueled consumerism continues to encourage economic growth, according to one researcher, while it depletes resources and basically throws away everything except consumerism (Sut Jhally, “Advertising” 35). Americans relinquish their ability – and responsibility – to think independently by accepting, rather than challenging, mass media information. Another researcher notes that “[t]he merger between media culture and politics, which began in earnest with the birth of TV, is now nearly complete” (Andersen, “Commercial Politics” 262).

Commercialism has become the dominant force in today’s corporate-controlled mass media. Advertisements have moved into programming where characters are defined by their consumerism and endorse commercial products by using them in the show. For example, J-Crew clothing was promoted in the popular teen television program *Dawson’s Creek* (Andersen, Introduction 1-2). While the success of product placement in big-screen movies has given

advertisers “enormous control” over movie content, it has offered even greater opportunities for corporations to cross-promote their own products. Now, corporate giants that own music, movie, and television media use entertainment to market their own music, videos, toys, and other products. The industry has built on this multipurpose-marketing so that entertainment becomes an endless line of tie-ins (Andersen, Introduction 4-6). According to one scholar, “the fashionable term for all of this vertical and lateral corporate integration is synergy, and synergy turns out to be just another word for monopoly” (Andersen, Introduction 7).

Synergy is a monopoly in which only the big companies are able to participate. Mega-corporation synergy controls global media and information that impacts society (McAllister 109). The blurring of the line between entertainment and advertising not only increases the marketing potential of entertainment but also decreases the information and usefulness of entertainment as advertising begins to “appropriate the icons and formulae of media content” (McAllister 119). In other words, marketing diminishes the potential of entertainment and news to provide information and messages that may be “democratically valuable” (McAllister 119).

Corporate control has also commercialized news programming. What was once called “the separation of church and state” in the media referred to the separation of news from the influence of ownership in an attempt to allow journalists to cover the news and to make journalistic decisions (Andersen, Introduction 10). However, this has changed as corporations such as Monsanto are able to squelch negative news stories and get reporters fired (Andersen, Introduction 10-11). Corporate control influences what gets reported. For example, the sub-standard pay and working conditions for Chinese laborers who manufacture Disney merchandise are unlikely to be publicized

in national news because Disney owns a major network (Andersen, Introduction 16).

Corporations have control over the news, but present the appearance of separation between the corporate owners and the content of the information being distributed (Andersen, Introduction 12).

News reports are now forced to be profitable so that journalist managers have been replaced with marketing professionals, and the boundaries between entertainment and news have virtually disappeared. News consultants, who have very secretive relationships with the news organizations that they serve, work behind the scenes to manage news content in order to attract viewers and build profits (Allen 84-85). The consultants' marketing data, gives them enormous influence over what was once journalistic decision-making. International news is neglected because foreign bureaus are expensive and do not fit with the profit agendas of corporations. Although other mass media sources – print, radio, and cable television – provide varying levels of international news coverage, broadcast television networks are usually limited to the high-impact stories that concern a large number of Americans. Meanwhile, celebrity activity often obscures world news. For example, in 1977, entertainment news averaged 15% of total content on television evening news; by 1997, entertainment news averaged 43% of total content (Andersen, *Critical Studies* 13-15). Mass media news increasingly focuses on celebrity gossip and viewer entertainment rather than information about the politics and technologies that are changing our world. Mass media virtually ignores stories about companies such as Monsanto that genetically alter crops and pump huge amounts of chemicals (drugs and pesticides) into food and water supplies. While incredible new advances in technology, science, and medicine offer prospects for a healthier future, they also present dangers of a Brave New World. Corporate-controlled media

focus Americans' attention on entertainment rather than news and information about these critical issues.

In the new millennium, new media technology, including digitalized broadcast signals, cable television, and Internet access, have fragmented media audiences and further complicated media control issues (Parker 328-29). Mass media no longer entertains the masses (Smith 83). Unlike the early years of television, in which all Americans watched the same programs, new technologies have enabled the fragmentation of media. Audiences have been compartmentalized into consumer packages through programming for specific interests (Spring 256). Therefore, unlike earlier disputes over radio, movies, and television, when audiences had to share entertainment, audiences now can be isolated with their own preferred images of society.

Scholars claim that even the Internet, which was touted as the new media information source for the masses, is succumbing to corporate control. People who hoped that the Internet would be a "cyberspace for the new millennium" may be disappointed as companies such as America On Line (AOL), with a 42% market share of America's home Internet service, exercise control by eliminating offensive chat rooms and shutting off user accounts (Andersen, *Critical Studies* 16). "Current trends toward Internet portals and the consolidation of media ownership," according to one scholar, "demonstrate that the tendency to control information and literacy is always at work" (Tyner xix). The Internet has also become more and more about marketing as commercial forces are quickly turning search engines into shopping tools. While the public may be seeking information, what they're ending up with is more consumerism (Andersen, *Critical Studies* 16).

Mass media's political and social influence on global culture impacts access to information, focuses on consumerism, and entertains audiences with sex and violence. Teens, and other mass media consumers, are encouraged to buy into the media images, to adopt media-generated identities, and to purchase the accouterments of those identities. Through entertainment, as well as other direct mass media advertising and marketing tools, teens are encouraged to focus on sex and purchase products that will make them attractive and popular. Teens, and other entertainment consumers, are provided limited, corporate perspectives that are typically unchallenged in mass media news and entertainment programming.

Solutions to Mass Media Influence: The Politics of Education

Although many scholars and activists agree that mass media influence threatens democratic discourse, their various solutions tend to be politically polarized. Some assert that a 1969 Supreme Court ruling guaranteeing First Amendment rights should prevent corporate monopolies from controlling mass media dissemination of information to the American public. They call for government regulation, noting that the United States is the only major nation to permit completely privatized ownership of mass media – even though the media have been given the responsibility for public information. They point out that the FCC, which is responsible for licensing and regulation, has increasingly permitted the corporate monopolization of mass media, while legislative incumbents are pressured by media owners who can easily impact political campaigns (Parker 324-30). Some activists encourage citizens to lobby for media legislation that will seize power from commercial corporate giants and restructure the mass media (Johnston 192). Some advocate censorship,

especially to protect children, while others argue that government censorship poses its own threat to free speech (Kaminer). Other solutions include: 1) FCC action promoting women and minority ownership of media; 2) low-powered, localized television and radio broadcasting; 3) community-access cable channels; 4) independent production and distribution of films; 5) internet “broadcasting” web sites; and 6) funding for Alternative Public Television (APT) (Johnston 159-92).

While scholars and activists debate political solutions to thwart mass media influence, many of them share an interest in educational solutions that teach media literacy. Media literacy, according to supporters, can incorporate competing political and social ideologies in order to foster critically aware citizens who are capable of political and social action (Cowie 317). Media literacy can look at how media interacts with culture, society, and government to influence how audiences view the world, their society, and ultimately themselves (Johnston 171-72). Both left-wing and right-wing ideologues see media literacy as a means for reestablishing democratic discourse among Americans who may be only marginally aware of mass media influence in their lives (Johnston 7).

Media literacy may also provide an educational solution for the problem of mass media influence on American teen sexual culture. Media literacy in K-12 education can encourage students to question and challenge information sources and consider how mass media messages may impact individuals and influence society. It can teach aural and visual literacy that not only help students read complex, embedded electronic messages, but also help them create alternatives to mass media images.

The United States lags behind other English-speaking nations that teach media literacy,

according to advocates who encourage the development of educational responses to the proliferation of new communication technologies (Hart 1-6). Technology in the classroom can provide educational enrichment for students who are accustomed to learning and communicating through technology. Media literacy can focus on making students critical consumers and creators of multimedia messages and allow them to interact with information in “multimedia, and hypermedia learning experiences” (Giles et al. 156).

Media literacy in the United States is not a unified area of educational theory. Teachers’ personal ideologies influence their approaches to media literacy and classroom education (Hobbs, “Media Literacy” 143). Some educators believe that media education should challenge culture by teaching critical analysis as well as production, while others believe that students should be protected from media influences. A surge of government funding in the 1970s directed research and teaching efforts toward critical viewing skills, and further direction came from funding for media arts and video production. In the 1980s, movement toward teaching core subjects severely diminished support for media literacy (Cowie 310-12). However, there was a resurgence of interest as national government agencies for drug control, education, and health recognized media literacy’s potential to teach students to identify and resist “inappropriate messages” relating to marketing, personal image, behaviors, and the depiction of society (Considine 299-312).

By the mid 1990s, school standards began to reflect a new focus on communications skills and a growing interest in media literacy. For example, the State of Minnesota added media literacy standards to the public school core curriculum (Lacy, 223-26), and the Pennsylvania State Board of Education approved goals that required students to be able to communicate and persuade, as

well as discern propaganda and create their own persuasive messages (Semali “Implementing” 283). In 1996, the IRA/NCTE English Language Arts Standards recognized the need for students to work with oral, written, and visual communication (Giles et al. 159). In 1998, the *English Journal*'s January issue featured media literacy teaching suggestions and technology insights from practicing K-12 educators, while the *Journal of Communication* also focused an entire issue on media literacy (Considine 299). Also in 1998, *Library Quarterly* published a librarian's proposal for bibliographic instruction that incorporated media literacy designed to help students identify control and bias in research information (Dilveko).

As state education departments, government agencies, and educators show increasing interest in media literacy, some advocates cite the practical problems of implementing K-12 media literacy education. These include time constraints of crowded curricula, inadequate teaching materials, and a lack of media literacy training in teacher preparation programs (Semali, “Implementing” 282). These advocates claim that educators in the classroom, rather than teacher education programs, are building media literacy education (Hobbs, “Media Literacy” 129-31).

Some media literacy educators reject academic resources that offer archetypes with strict standards (Hart 20). These grassroots advocates encourage teachers to develop their own teaching resources as an alternative to academic (or corporate media) curricula that reinforce social norms and the top-down distribution of hierarchical knowledge (Cowie 314-15). According to these advocates, media literacy educators commonly “recognize that all media are constructed representations, that meaning is derived from the intersection of reader, text, and culture, and that messages have economic, political, social, and historical contexts” (Hobbs, “Media Literacy” 128-

29). While some grassroots media literacy educators shun academic scholarship, others identify a need for academic research that informs practice and justifies media literacy education.

Some academic scholars, who share the concerns of grassroots educators, argue that media literacy “must be conceived as political, social, and cultural practice” that engages postmodern theories while recognizing the hierarchy of educational practice (Sholle and Denski 306). Educational reformers encourage a shift away from traditional top-down pedagogy toward a learning-centered approach for pre-service teachers to develop a deeper understanding, awareness, and critical attitude toward teaching practice that incorporates the knowledge and experience of students (Risko 92-93). This teaching practice, according to scholars, can transform the power structures in the classroom in order to access the knowledge of students who best understand the multimedia environment and their learning capabilities within it (Considine 317-19).

Postmodern perspectives may unite scholars with grassroots educators, but competing ideologies, politics, and research perspectives may pose an obstacle to the development of academic approaches to media literacy education. Although a broad range of academic disciplines contributes knowledge and research to media literacy theory, according to some media literacy advocates academics often “suffer from cultural myopia because of the limitations of academic specialization and their own special-interest groups” (Duncan ix). These advocates criticize the lack of interdisciplinary cooperation that results in individual disciplinary perspectives that target “narrowly defined academic discourse communities” (Pailliotet xxiv).

English education, uniquely situated as the academic discipline responsible for language arts in the K-12 core curriculum, can provide a unified, multi-disciplinary program of study that expands

traditional literacy skills to include communication in non-print media. English teacher education programs can centrally focus cross-disciplinary scholarly perspectives on the interconnectedness of mass communications, public discourse, power structures, and social cultures (Lankshear and McLaren, Greene, ix-x; Bekins 42).

As communication becomes increasingly computerized and electronic, some English scholars are revising the focus on printed text and written composition. Some English educators suggest that using multimedia technology for teaching literary texts can give students a critical way of approaching sign systems and visual symbols (Tyner xv; Mulcahy-Ernt 138-39). For example, hypermedia can be used to critically respond to literature using print, visuals, video, sound, and links to web sites (Hammett 106-07). Other English educators advocate expanding the “deep reading” of print media to include the “deep viewing” of visual media (Briggs 65). In some English programs, students are developing critical skills to deconstruct mass media messages and practical skills to construct their own persuasive, multi-media communications (Griest 15-17; Cowie 313).

Although critical studies in English literature programs can contribute to media literacy education, rhetoric – often located in modern composition and rhetoric programs – provides proven analysis methods for both print and non-print literacy. Rhetorical scholarship, historically situated in educational practices as well as democratic discourse, has evolved along with communication technologies since the early days of oratory in ancient Greece and Rome. Rhetoric, according to Aristotle, is “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (153). According to Cicero, the power of oratory persuades people and establishes civil order (204). Both Aristotle and Cicero focus on persuasion through orators’ words as well as aural and visual

aspects of performances.

Rhetoric's roots in a primarily oral culture provide analysis tools for decoding embedded messages and symbols in modern, multi-sensory entertainment that is designed to persuade a non-interactive audience. Rhetoric not only evaluates the content of mass media messages, it looks at the intent of mass media message-makers by focusing on both the purpose and method of persuasion. Teaching rhetorical analysis techniques can mitigate the influence of modern mass media on culture and democratic discourse by creating critical awareness. Thus, rhetoric can impact teen sexual culture by helping students discern specific influences of entertainment content and general influences of mass media.

Rhetoric in Education

Rhetoric is an interpretive theory that frames the message as an interested party's attempt to influence an audience. The sender's intention is understood to be manifested in the argument, the evidence, the order of argumentation, and the style of delivery. Formal elements are selected according to the sender's expectations in accordance with how the audience will approach the genre, the speaker, and topic (Carstarphen xvi).

Rhetoric is often disparaged by non-academics who associate the term with the negative connotations of its current common use. However, rhetorical theory – by any name – belongs in education. My approach to rhetoric in education is similar to that of Barry Brummett who argues for rhetorical theory and criticism that do not attempt to emulate social science research. Rhetorical

theory, according to Brummett, should not be tested by criticism to determine its usefulness, but should be viewed as a method of inquiry that helps build knowledge about persuasive devices (652-55). Brummett states that rhetorical theory should be seen less as a “store of scholarly knowledge possessed by the academic community,” and more as a resource of “general knowledge” for non-scholars (653). He asserts that if scholars see students as the “primary audience of rhetorical theory and its criticisms, then rhetorical theory and criticism’s ultimate goal and justification is pedagogical: *to teach people how to experience their rhetorical environments more richly*” (658). Thus, rhetorical theory offers students multiple perspectives for interpreting new experiences. Brummett makes my argument for “restoring rhetoric to the foundations of liberal arts education” (661). In other words, return rhetoric – in the academic sense of the word – to the scholarly training of student communicators.

The long history of rhetorical scholarship encompasses many theoretical perspectives. Current academic studies tend to separate rhetoric into three periods: ancient, medieval, and modern. Current academic scholarship in rhetoric, as in other disciplinary areas, includes a wide range of both research methods and political and social ideologies. For example, using feminist criticism to critique Hollywood movies and MTV videos, theorists, such as bell hooks and Sut Jhally, seek to empower students, and others, to resist the messages of dominant, white males in American society. Other scholars draw on a variety of theories ranging from Marxism to Dramatism.

This thesis intentionally focuses on less politicized theories that may appeal to a wide range of educational ideologies. Media literacy education can benefit from theories such as Walter R.

Fisher's narrative paradigm in which public moral argument replaces the rational world paradigm. Fisher affirms the communications expertise that all humans have in any given society. Fisher's democratic approach asserts that everyone has social knowledge and reasoning to determine who is telling a story and which story to believe. Fisher suggests that people base their understanding of messages on a social hierarchy of values with love at the apex. In this perspective, common people do not have to rely on specialists in order to determine the veracity of arguments. Stephen Toulmin also offers a perspective that moves away from formally structured argument and provides non-specialist methods to evaluate real-world persuasive messages. For the purpose of this thesis, I have chosen theories from Aristotle and Burke to suggest student rhetorical critique exercises. Although no approach can be apolitical, I have selected rhetorical theories that represent my effort to provide simple methodology for teaching different ways for students to read multi-sensory media.

To demonstrate rhetoric's function in media literacy education, I designed two student-centered rhetorical critique exercises. Because this thesis does not include research with student participants, I modeled these assignments by viewing and analyzing one teen-targeted artifact for each critical method. Although age-demographic statistics for current movies and television programs are not readily available, web sites and teen magazines provide insights into which media teens are watching. Teens, who often attend the same movie multiple times, make up the largest percentage of the movie-going audience in the United States (Stevens 10). Television programs continue to be popular among teens, while new media technology including Internet web sites, games, and chat rooms are becoming increasingly attractive for those who have access to computer technology.

For the purpose of this demonstration, I chose the medium of movies because they often provide more extensive production techniques and embedded messages than television programs. Further, the value of analytical critique is not in counting depictions of casual sex, for example, but rather in identifying embedded persuasion. Rhetorical analysis, as a discovery tool, should assist students in evaluating media without making students feel that their favorite music or television entertainment is being attacked. Thus, the following critiques examine two newly released films – *Clock Stoppers* (suspense) and *Big Fat Liar* (comedy) – that are both rated Parental Guidance (PG). The PG rating provides middle-ground between G-rated movies that teens shun, and PG-13 rated movies that may raise more parental objections. The two movies are tame in sexual content while rich in rhetorical learning experiences.

Aristotle’s approach to rhetorical analysis continues to be valid in modern multimedia environments. Aristotle’s rhetorical theory focuses on the speaker’s character (ethos), the listener’s emotion (pathos), and the subject’s logic (logos). Audiences continue to be influenced by perceptions of message sources, audience attributes, and appeals to logical reasoning. This perspective sees the audience in terms of message construction and intended persuasion. According to one researcher, “[i]t has been common knowledge in rhetorics, from Aristotle onward, that communicators need to know their audience” (Hellman 144). Media managers look at audiences through ratings systems in order to “[r]econstitute them as institutionally effective audiences that have social meaning and economic value in the system” (Hellman 145). Aristotle’s theory can help students evaluate persuasive messages that are targeted at them.

The first rhetorical critique method, based on Aristotle’s theory of persuasion, could be

assigned to early middle school students. The teacher would facilitate student definitions for ethos, logos, and pathos by using newsprint, an easel, and colored markers, or a more high-tech, multimedia approach. Students might define ethos as ethics, morals, rules, “right and wrong,” traditions, etc. Logos might be called logic, common sense, “using your head,” etc. And, pathos might translate to emotions such as love, anger, fear, joy, etc. Students would discuss their own experiences of ethos, logos, and pathos (ELP) appeals that come from mass media, home, school, and society. Teachers would then focus the discussion on ways that visual elements can clarify, reinforce, or argue against spoken words. Once students become familiar with ELP terms, and how visual and oral elements interact, they can practice their new knowledge in a rhetorical critique of a movie, either as an in-class exercise, a homework assignment, or an after-school activity.

For this assignment, teachers could provide a “Movie Critic” review sheet that has three separate columns, one for each element of ELP. The top of the sheet would instruct students to look for ELP visual clues such as postures, facial features, objects, scenes/settings and camera focus. Students would look for visual examples for each column and explain whether the visual reinforced, expanded, or undermined what was being said. Students should also look for ELP visual elements that give meaning without any verbal references.

I attended a matinee showing of *Clock Stoppers* that turned out to be a private viewing during which I was able to use a voice recorder to ensure the accuracy of my recall. Even though students might see the movie in a crowded theater with their friends and other distractions, their media-savvy would help them to complete the movie review sheet after the viewing.

In *Clock Stoppers*, a science-fiction adventure, Zak comes to the rescue of his scientist

father who is being held hostage by the bad guys who want to use a time manipulation device as a weapon. The device, which can be made to look like an ordinary watch, causes the person wearing it to speed up so quickly that everyone and everything else is virtually standing still. Zak, a teenage Euro-American, “is assisted by the lovely” Francesca, a Venezuelan, new-kid at school. Although targeted at a younger audience, this movie provides excellent examples of embedded visual rhetoric. Visual cues, especially clothing and accessories, encourage viewers to type-cast characters.

Character ethos, in many cases, is visually established prior to dialog. For example, in one scene, the head bad guy, a Euro-American, is joined on the elevator by two new characters. Within seconds, before any words are spoken, the viewer is cued that the new characters – a straight-backed, angularly thin, Asian-featured female, and a strongly-built, determined-looking, African-American male – are also bad guys. The visual rhetoric implies that a non-submissive, Asian female is somehow foreign, and a stern-faced, African-American male is somehow threatening. In a scene near the end of the film, both the Asian woman and the African American man are shown in a quick shot just before the good guys express their fear that the bad guys are going to kill them.

Visual stereotyping includes Francesca’s character who sometimes appears ethnically exotic and other times appears completely Americanized. The visual elements, especially her clothing which shifts from vulnerable skirts to sporty athletic wear, support the oral elements as her character sometimes speaks with a strong Hispanic accent and other times speaks distinctly American English.

Other visual stereotype characterizations include: the messy-haired, sloppy, pierced, trouble-maker dudes at school; the half-hip-hop and half-reggae persona of Zak's nice, but not overly-smart, African-American friend; and Zak's younger sister who has chaotic hair, jewelry, and accessories. In an early scene, Zak's sister's erratic movements wrap him in a long kitchen phone cord. When Zak disentangles himself from the twisted phone cord he is visually separating himself from his sister's chaos. At the end of the movie, the younger sister's hair no longer sticks out in psuedo-ponytails, but is neatly-combed and is accessorized with a little-girl hair clip. Immediately, the viewer recognizes that the younger sister has abandoned her chaotic rebelliousness and is happy being a more conventional child.

Visual elements also make logical appeals. Zak consistently wears a bicycle helmet even though he rides wildly all over town. Zak also consistently wears a seat belt – both as a driver and as a passenger – even when the bad guys are pursuing him. In fact, after Zak crashes into the river, he appears to be secured by a seat belt. These examples persuade viewers to make the logical choice of wearing bicycle helmets and seat belts that help diminish the potential for injury even when the biker or driver is taking other risks.

An emotional appeal is made to viewers' sense of family. In early scenes, Zak's family is distracted and unaware of each other. Zak's parents, busy with activity, move around each other without making eye contact or speaking to each other. When Zak feels neglected, his father gives Zak his business trip itinerary which Zak intentionally puts aside without looking at it. In the final scenes, Zak's parents are physically touching, and verbally communicating with each other and their children. This family interaction is depicted as more normal, comfortable, and healthy. The family

members have shifted from their self-centered chaos in the beginning of the film to this family-centered cooperation.

Emotional and passionate appeals are, not surprisingly, often sexual. Viewers are visually encouraged to admire and desire Francesca who, in her home environment, is always surrounded by many, many candles. Francesca inflames passion with her beauty and accessibility. In one scene, she is riding on the back of Zak's bicycle with her skirt blowing around her legs and her buttocks raised high in the air. In another scene, Zak's father, who obviously admires his son's attractive girlfriend, says that he understands why Zak wanted the red Mustang. In another visually evoking scene, Zak, when he first discovers hyper-time, voyeuristically looks at Francesca as he moves toward her virtually motionless body. He realizes that he could take advantage of her inability to resist him. In a more contrived scene, Francesca, who has recently showered and is standing in front of a motel room mirror self-confidently fingering her long hair, threatens to kick the hippie/student scientist who attempted to capture Francesca and Zak. In an earlier scene, Francesca's head-high kicks knocked the scientist into submission. In this scene, the viewer is invited to imagine the attractive young woman, dressed only in a white towel, doing another high kick.

Francesca continually represents stereotypical female sexuality, while Zak waivers between sexual desire and higher human emotion. In one scene, Zak puts his hand on Francesca's back to show that he is being kind, but then his eyes lustfully follow her body as she walks away. As Francesca and Zak becomes more romantically interested in each other, her posture toward him becomes more submissive, as she leans closer to him, and his posture toward her becomes more

protective, as he stands taller and firmer. In a scene in which Francesca agrees to go shopping, she struts with her hips to show that females know how to shop. When the cashless male characters stand empty-handed, Francesca whips out a credit card and hands it to the clerk. As the shopping scene continues, while the male characters steal the high-tech supplies, Francesca exploits her sensuality to distract two unattractive, young males, wearing black-framed, cat-eye glasses. Afterwards, the two “geekie” males watch Francesca’s body as she walks away – her accomplices already having walked away with the stolen goods.

Francesca’s character, and other imagery such as Zak’s African-American male friend stroking color magazine photos of attractive females, evoke objectification of women. The opposite of Francesca’s young, athletic and strong, yet emotionally vulnerable and willing character is the Asian female who is a sharp-stepping, business-oriented, self-confident, cold, and inaccessible adult woman. Her cold sexuality combines with her evil ethos as one of the bad guys. This suggests that “good” females are sexually “warm” and willing, while “bad” females control their sexuality.

At the end, Zak drives off in the red Mustang, that he has coveted, with the attractive Francesca, whom he has also coveted, sitting in the passenger seat. Zak’s younger sister is in the back seat with the hippie/student scientist who has accidentally been transformed into a teenager. Zak’s sister’s attraction to this formerly mature, adult character hints at adult-child sexuality. As the two couples drive off in hyper-time, the song lyrics in the background ask the question “Do you want to come with me?” – implying the double-entendre of the final verb.

In addition to other visual messages, *Clock Stoppers*’s product placements feature Zak

and his sister drinking Pepsi and Naya water, and Zak and Francesca in quiet, romantic scenes that often include a black, BMW convertible. E-Bay was also advertised by Zak's successful side-business that involves buying cheap junk and then selling it at a profit. In this movie review assignment, middle school students should be able to find many visual examples of ethical, emotional, and logical appeals that target teen audiences.

In the second rhetorical critique, students could discuss Burke's identification theory. According to Burke, human speech creates negatives that do not exist in the non-human, natural world. Human language enables the conception of theories and ideologies that distinguish one human from another. Identification allows the unification of people so they can cooperate toward a common action. Cooperative action can be beneficial, but it can also facilitate action against others who are outside of the identification group. For example, working together, humans can make productive use of common resources or they can make war on people outside of their identification group. In the second rhetorical critique method, students would evaluate oral and visual messages that signal identification.

For this critique, I did not use the audio recorder because the movie was well attended. Instead, I took the student role of watching the film, noting important points, and recalling the information afterwards. Although this process went fairly smoothly, students who are assigned a rhetorical critique for homework would undoubtedly benefit from viewing and discussing the movie with their friends in a cooperative project. An in-class, or after-school viewing, on the other hand, would make it easier for students to take notes.

When I selected the comedy *Big Fat Liar*, I did not know that the movie's central theme is

identification. The rapid audio and visual representations pile on layers of identification so quickly that it is difficult to keep pace. Music, background props, and verbal cues continually prompt recognition of old movies and television programs. The story line focuses on a 14-year-old boy, Jason, who is a liar and thereby loses his parents' trust. In an unlikely twist, Jason accidentally drops his homework assignment, titled "Big Fat Liar," in the limousine of a Hollywood producer who steals the story. When the new movie media hype begins circulating, Jason's parents refuse to believe his claims that the movie is based on the story he wrote. Jason convinces his friend Kaylee, a teenage girl, to accompany him to California. In Hollywood, Jason and Kaylee end up identifying with all of the people who have been mistreated by the self-centered, lying producer. Just as in Burke's identification theory, these different individual characters unite to fight a common enemy, the lying movie producer.

In this movie, identification is layered on top of identification. The movie employs formerly well-known, real-life, television actors who have not acted in anything recently. For example, Lee Majors, who in his waning days of television starred as a stunt man, plays the role of a soon-to-retire stunt director. Viewers are invited to identify with the unfair treatment of stars who have been discarded when their television roles ended. Another layer of identification occurs when the lying producer jokes that a heavy-set, female publicity coordinator looks like she eats "Twinkies." The producer's young, thin, female assistant stops eating her doughnut, in mid-bite, looks at it, and sets it aside. Two separate scenes refer back to the viewer's identification with people who are mistreated because of body-size perceptions and power relationships. In one scene, the young assistant, who is now master-minding the plot against the producer, contentedly munches on cheese

and sausage. In a later scene, the overweight publicity coordinator, after helping to expose the lying producer, takes a big bite of a Twinkie, and savors the mouthful in front of the producer. In many ways, *Big Fat Liar* invites viewers to identify with nontraditional media images of underdogs and less popular people of society. It invites viewers to appreciate people who are older, heavier, shorter, and non-cool. Some *Big Fat Liar* characters, who are not necessarily “nice”, end up sharing redeeming identification with other characters. For example, a dumb bully is able to enjoy working out with a very small, stooped, elderly woman.

The movie also invites viewers to identify with human faults such as lying. In one scene, the characters look a bit guilty when the lying producer states that everyone lies at least a little bit. Less obvious identification calls for viewers’ willingness to accept deception, theft, and meanness, if the cause is just. Viewers are also invited to identify with caricatures of Hollywood personality types. Kaylee imitates characters – such as the empty-headed secretary, an over-bearing director, and a spoiled movie star – in such a way that viewers can laugh at and appreciate human flaws. During the final scenes of the movie, the real-life audience identification was so complete that viewers began applauding along with the movie characters who were watching the fictitious movie credits roll.

Visual messages in this movie reinforce gender identification. In one scene, Kaylee playfully dances around in various grown-up costumes, such as evening gowns and gaudy boas, as she tries on adult personas. Meanwhile Jason dresses as a pirate, a cowboy, and so forth. Other visual and verbal identification messages are embedded in scenes that depict Euro-American characters clumsily imitating African-American speech, gestures, and attire. Viewers can see that a Euro-

American male who acts African-American is an embarrassment to himself and potentially insulting to others. On the other hand, Euro-American characters who exhibit limited and respectful sharing of African-American cultural knowledge – for example, Jason’s interaction with the an African-American limousine driver – have positive identifications that help individuals from different cultural groups work together.

By rhetorically analyzing films, teens can better understand how mass media entertainment influences their perceptions of sex and sexuality. Teens may note, for example, the rapid relationship building between Zak and Francesca that assumes an audience expectation of sexual intimacy. The couple, although they do not engage in sex in the film, transition quickly from being verbal sparring partners to being emotionally romantic partners. An analysis of *Big Fat Liar*, although it is less overtly sexual than *Clock Stoppers*, demonstrates for teens how the character of the early-teen female Kaylee is balanced on her awakening awareness of her maturing, physically attractive body. Kaylee’s character reinforces female role models of dressing-up and acting-out in traditionally feminine ways. Even though Kaylee does not use sexuality as a tool, she does “play” with adult models of sexual stereotypes as she wafts around in a flowing sweater-vest displaying her almost-a-woman finesse. The two sample exercises, model the use of rhetorical theory in expanding students’ abilities to interpret and challenge multi-media content. By prodding these types of portrayals in complex electronic entertainment messages, teens can enhance their rhetorical understandings of media influence on their own identities and on social culture.

Conclusion

As new technologies, such as computer-mediated communication, expand the potential for mass influence on society, rhetoric in K-12 media literacy education addresses American teen sexual culture as well as larger global issues. Sex, and its co-star violence, have been, and continue to be, the focus of entertainment. Mass media producers, according to some researchers, are only concerned with the issue of sex and violence inasmuch as it effects their profits (Spring 258). Current mass media conditions highlight the need for critical analysis through media literacy education. English education programs that focus on traditional grammar and literature curricula must respond to the evolution of technology that has changed language and human communications. Rhetorical analysis training recognizes students' responsibilities and interests in today's technological world by enabling them to evaluate the powerful persuasion that is taking place during their constant exposure to mass media.

The terrorist attack on America speaks to the issue of media influence. Non-violent, fundamentalist Muslims, who fear the erosion of their culture under the influence of the global media, sympathize with the anti-American sentiments of the terrorists. Globally, both violent extremists and non-violent activists are seeking ways to prevent people in their countries from seeing and being influenced by the American culture portrayed in the mass media. Some places in Western Europe have put trade barriers on American entertainment in an attempt to counter media influence on their cultures (Smith 74). Even in America, many scholars and activists – both conservative and liberal – want to challenge the mass media's powerful influence not only on foreign cultures but on American culture as well. According to one author, the British once colonized by

sending their military forces and then eventually their educational system, while the Americans just plain send their television shows (Postman 47). However, unlike terrorists who use violence to control other people, many scholars and activists promote greater public awareness and encourage social and non-violent political action.

It is a hard-to-face possibility – but one we as Americans may need to accept – that the horror of terrorism could be the catalyst for self-reflection and a new direction in media consumption and critical media awareness. In addition to raising the issue of media influence on culture, the terrorist attacks also impacted American entertainment content. After the events of September 11th, Americans were so overwhelmed with grief and shock that media moguls shelved certain violent movie releases and screened scheduled television programs for potentially offensive content. One network dropped a complete soap opera storyline, including already recorded segments, while another network postponed a prime time program that was based on an anthrax attack (Scott). Music companies altered CD covers that depicted explicit violence, and some radio station programmers avoided airing potentially offensive songs (Miller). In the months following September 11th, Americans took a fresh look at violent content in entertainment (Brook; Warthen). Yet entertainment industry executives predicted that Americans would return to violent entertainment and, less than four months after the attacks, movie studios released productions such as Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Collateral Damage*. Many Americans, apparently having recovered from their initial shock, have returned to their pre-September 11th media consumption habits.

Rhetoric can help build viewer awareness of the influence of entertainment. Rhetorical theory interrogates the complexities of multi-sensory messages to reveal persuasive content and

producer intent. For example, a rhetorical analysis of the Bruce Willis film *Unbreakable* would show the action as the camera angle slides the viewer into the rapist's perspective of an enticing young woman who is passed out on a bed. Rhetorical theory would identify the profit motive of producers who, by appearing to depict the rape negatively through the super-hero's eyes, could stimulate repeat ticket sales – especially among teenagers – by giving viewers an involuntary pleasure factor.

Would Hollywood producers go to this extreme to get people to watch a movie and not know why they enjoyed it? Media marketing analysis tools have become increasingly sophisticated. For example, in the early 1990s, Home Box Office (HBO) used Interactive Brainwave Visual Analyzer (IBVA) technology to gauge viewer responses to entertainment content by measuring brainwave activity (Davidson 21). Within several years, IBVA technology had become so compact and affordable that it was being used for biofeedback type joysticks on interactive games (Gross). As mass media producers continue to manipulate audiences using the most current psychological and technological methods available, rhetorical analysis of mass media productions can benefit from interdisciplinary scholarship in marketing and mass media research to learn about these practices.

Further research on mass media influence is necessary in order to enhance our understanding of communication systems in society. However, in the complicated context of personal and social influences, researchers may never be able to establish a causal relationship between mass media content and audience behavior. Regardless of the actual influence of mass media, K-12 students will benefit from rhetorical training in media literacy education.

My personal experience as a long-time substitute teacher, and as a conflict management facilitator have influenced my perspectives on the role of rhetoric in media literacy education. I have interviewed teachers, administrators, and school psychologists, regarding school violence. I have spoken with classroom teachers who sought positive responses to post-Columbine fears of violence in schools. This thesis has brought me full-circle. Through media literacy education, rhetoric can improve students' critical analysis of sexual content, as well as help them identify media-generated models of conflict that depict quick-fixes rather than peaceful, cooperative, collaboration toward positive solutions.

Rhetoric is not a panacea for the negative impact of sex and violence in entertainment, nor will rhetoric alone correct disparities in democratic discourse. Rhetorical education, in my perspective, is not a substitute for political and social action, but rather a tool for these activities. Rhetorical theory will be unavoidably influenced by the ideologies of educators; it should also be influenced by the ideologies of students. My own political bias, toward traditional democratic debate, recognizes the productive potential of multi-perspective conflicts. A democratic approach to media literacy education does not lock students into the ideologies of teachers and professors, but rather frees them to make their own choices to challenge cultural norms portrayed in the media or to challenge the cultural ideologies professed by their educators.

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