One irony of popular culture is that while we are surrounded by its numerous artifacts (advertisements, television shows, movies, music videos, and so on), most of us believe that we are uninfluenced by these artifacts. "TV commercials use all kinds of gimmicks," we say, "but I'm aware of them. They don't persuade me." "The Lion King is just a cartoon; it's for fun. Don't read so much into it." Or: "Cut Barbie some slack. Playing with dolls never distorted my self-image."

But the discourse of popular culture is all around us all of the time. And it has been since birth. Wayne Booth (1988a) writes that "all of us are naturally tempted, of course, to think that ... by the time we reach maturity, we have learned to be 'critical' and are thus somehow immune to the effects others may suffer" (p. 41). But are we immune? And what effects might we suffer upon consumption of the toys, clothes, and mass-mediated messages of our culture?

Children do not walk out of The Lion King as newly enthused patriarchs, nor does playing with Barbie lead them directly to a desire for the unattainable body. But these products do wield influence. Here's how: People always make their worlds meaningful. None of our experiences comes to us in some pristine state complete with an obvious meaning about which everyone agrees. Instead we often struggle (both internally and with others) over the meaning of daily occurrences. Do those Express jeans signify comfort, a good fashion
sense, or an air of superiority? Is *Seinfeld* simple comedy, distasteful, or social commentary? (Should I laugh at Kramer whooping it up with his cigar store Indian?) Are Bush’s actions toward Iraq intelligent foreign policy, intrusive militarism, or political profiteering? We always make these experiences meaningful in one way or another.

Most often we get the meanings for these experiences from the discourses of popular culture. We see television commercials for Express jeans; we watch *Seinfeld* and read articles about it in the newspaper or in *TV Guide*; we are bombarded by commentaries about Bush’s policies on the CBS news, Rush Limbaugh’s radio show, and in editorials. From these and numerous other sources we learn the range of possible meanings by which we make sense of our daily experiences. This is not to say that we read the texts of popular culture uncritically, for we can and do argue with the meanings suggested to us. But if we reject one set of meanings, we do so in favor of another set of meanings that comes from other popular texts and artifacts.

The various texts and artifacts of popular culture, then, are constantly telling us how to think, how to dress, how to talk, what vocations are significant, and what we should do politically and economically; in sum, they tell us who to be. Some texts do this overtly, like speeches or debates we see on C-Span. Other texts advocate meanings more subtly, and artifacts like *The Lion King* and Barbie are in this category. They operate subtly because we tend to not even think of them as texts, and we are thus likely to assume that they do not influence us.

One particularly striking example illustrates the degree to which these subtle texts have power to establish meanings. Several years ago Anna Quindlen argued in her column that Barbie creates an ideal body image for girls that is distorted and damaging. Quindlen (1994) reported about a University of Arizona study that found that white teenage girls were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with their bodies and engaged in extensive dieting to reach their desired weights, even though most of them weighed within the normal range for girls of their age and height. The researchers’ conclusion: “the ideal girl was a living manifestation of the Barbie doll.” Quindlen traces Barbie’s influence (“the most popular toy ever created”) and states that the doll’s “preposterous physique” (40-18-32 if life sized, with too little body fat to sustain menstruation) has established some dangerous meanings about desirable female body shapes.

But Quindlen’s column was not the striking example. The striking example was a letter in response that questioned Barbie’s influence. Barbie is “just pretend,” the writer asserted, so don’t take her so seriously; she “hasn’t distorted my body image one bit.” But the writer then recounts with pleasure her childhood memories of Barbie playtime: when she dressed Barbie and Ken for a night on the town, she writes, “I was transplanted to a swell party in Palm Springs”; when Barbie wore her stewardess outfit, “it was I who was serving coffee on a 727”; and when Barbie sunned by the pool, “I was a teenager getting a tan” (Koch 1994). Could we have clearer testimony to Barbie’s influence? Here Barbie helps define standards for fashion, entertainment, job possibilities for women, and beauty. And if Barbie is influential in these areas for the letter writer, why not assume that for others she is influential with respect to body image? Especially when Quindlen provides such compelling evidence for that influence. In each of these cases, Barbie functions as a text that offers meanings by which people organize and interpret past experiences, present events, and future possibilities.

Surely Barbie is not solely responsible for setting such meanings, nor does *The Lion King* alone sustain a system of patriarchy, nor does any one message convince us all to think a certain way about Iraq. But when these items enter into an environment of texts and cultural artifacts that encourage particular ways of thinking and acting, the cumulative influence is difficult to dismiss. The message of Barbie is reproduced continually in movies, television programs, advertisements, and fashion shows, so even if we resist it in one incarnation we are likely to absorb it in a multitude of other incarnations. Its ubiquity makes it influential. We need not claim that every toy, movie, and television show is evil; but we would do well to recognize the possible influences of these things, rather than to assume we are immune to the messages we consume on a daily basis.
This book explores how we might assess these possible influences, with a special focus on how the discourses of popular culture construct ethical codes. My effort in this chapter is to underscore both how the discourses of popular culture construct such codes and how the critical assessment of popular culture is itself an ethical act. Two assumptions underlie this effort.

The first is that rhetoric's primary effect is to create people's identities. Booth (1988b) calls this rhetoric's "epideictic center": "when words make your past, present, and future, what they really make is you" (p. 36); and he relates this effect to students and, by implication, to other publics and audiences: "The reality that is most decisively made, in every kind of rhetoric our students meet, is people, the very shapes of their minds and souls" (p. 41, emphasis added). This is the critical point in the Barbie example above. Popular culture's texts and artifacts tell us who to be. Such an effect differs from the mechanistically causal effects we often associate with neo-Aristotelian criticism or with some types of mass communication research. Much of the discourse of popular culture encourages us to remain the same rather than to change in any measurable way, so while its influence is profound, its effects are difficult to discern. They are important, nonetheless, because they are ethical effects. Edwin Black's classic essay "The Second Persona" (1970) demonstrates that apart from any "actual auditors" one might identify, every discourse implies an auditor, or a persona, and "the critic can see in the auditor implied by a discourse a model of what the rhetor would have his real auditor become" (p. 113). The discourses of popular culture advocate second personas, and in so doing they help to shape people's identities by modeling a collage of convictions and viewpoints for their implied ideal auditors. That collage constitutes a sense of character, it identifies the moral qualities and habits that we associate with a virtuous demeanor, and it thus advocates an ethic by which to evaluate individual and community actions.

The second assumption is also embedded in Booth's idea of the epideictic center. To emphasize a different clause in the quotation cited above, "The reality that is most decisively made, in every kind of rhetoric our students meet, is people, the very shapes of their minds and souls" (1988b, p. 41, emphasis added). It is nothing new to note that rhetorical criticism is itself rhetoric (e.g., Brockriede 1974). But as we engage in the rhetorical criticism of popular culture, we should recognize that just as the discourse we examine implies an ideal character and thus endorses particular ethical qualities, so does the discourse we produce imply an ideal character and thus endorse particular ethical qualities. Assessments of critical invention have clarified the ways in which critics work from political perspectives and in support of professional interests (e.g., Nothstine, Blair, & Copeland 1994; Blair, Brown, & Baxter 1994). Like the discourse of popular culture, the discourse of criticism speaks to issues of power. When we present criticism, whether in the popular press, in academic publications, in the classroom, or in conversations with our friends, we encourage our audiences to be a certain kind of people, to understand the world in particular ways, and to assume a particular set of convictions about how communication works in that world. Like all discourse, any critical act constructs a second persona that models the ideal character the critic would like his or her auditors to become.

Naomi Rockler's excellent critique of Beverly Hills, 90210 illustrates the two assumptions I have outlined above, and emphasizes the importance of critical skills even (and perhaps especially) for those who are not professional or academic critics. Rockler (1999) first provides an ideological analysis of the television show that demonstrates how it has constructed both an "ideology of traditional, idealized femininity" and an "ideology of consumption" (p. 77) that instruct us how to think about beauty, sexuality, romance, our status as consumers, and specific products. The implied auditor of the show embraces particular values: heterosexuality is normal, the display of sexuality is good, and the acquisition of material goods is unquestioned. While various storylines temporarily emphasize alternative values—like women should be intelligent and strong, for example—the show's pervasive themes consistently create a second persona in line with traditional patriarchal and capitalist values.

Rockler next reports her analysis of viewers' responses to Beverly Hills, 90210. She conducts focus group interviews with female
college students and discovers that most are unable to generate any critical responses beyond the observation that the show is “just entertainment” and therefore— they assume— not worthy of evalu­ative critique. These friendly critiques of the program also suggest a persona for the focus group participants. They should watch the show for its entertainment value, recognize that it is unrealistic, and not concern themselves with any potential ideological or ethical effects. Rockler’s assessment is that these viewers are constrained from more meaningful evaluation of the show by their lack of a critical vocabulary (pp. 90–91). Her ideal auditor is a more sophisti­cated critic who recognizes the ideological dimensions of the commu­nication he or she encounters in daily experiences.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into two sections. The first section suggests that the most significant influence rendered by the discourse of popular culture is its influence on the strategies of interpretation that people use to construct their experiences and their identities. The second section argues that this influence is an ethical effect and that the rhetorical criticism of popular culture can render a similar ethical effect because it, too, can influence those strategies of interpretation.

Communication as a Medium of Experience

In earlier work I developed the idea that communication comprises a medium within which all of human experience comes to exist (Bineham 1995). I want to revisit that idea here and to recast it so that it accounts clearly for how the discourse of popular culture creates identities for people.

James Carey (1989) notes that in western culture and research the most common view of communication is the transmission view. Communication in this view is a medium by which to transport messages from one place or person to another place or person, and an examination of the models of communication in almost any text­book reveals the dominance of this view. The medium is the delivery system, the intermediate channel that stands between source and receiver. But Carey also notes the existence of a less common view of communication, which he calls the ritual view. In this perspec­tive the function of communication is not simply to transmit mes­sages; communication creates and sustains a “meaningful cultural world” that serves as a “container for human action” (p. 19), and is thus a “symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed” (p. 23). Just as water comprises the “me­dium that forms [the] ambience and supports [the] existence” of a fish, so does communication comprise the ambience of existence for humans (p. 24).

The term medium here does not refer to a delivery system but to the symbolic substance within which humans live; it is the culture of meanings from which people create their personalities, their experiences, their convictions, and their worlds. This symbolic medium is comprised of language in its various manifestations: words, titles, meanings, definitions, reasons, arguments, structures of rationality, narratives, characterizations, symbolic forms, visual images, and the like. We are quite literally born into this ongoing medium, and as we develop within it we acquire the sentiments that it features. The medium contains the categories of thought that enable us to understand what it means to be male or female. The medium contains the narratives of self-defense, the noble rescue, and the heroic quest that help us to make sense of U.S. foreign policy. And the medium contains visual images that help frame our conceptions of the Middle East, Africa, South Los Angeles, and other places with which most of us have little or no direct contact. The medium always predates the individuals who inhabit it, so those individu­als enter a world that is already structured and interpreted, and they inherit the dominant storylines of the culture. Throughout this chapter, the phrase the medium will denote this encompassing and pervasive amalgam of language that makes experience possible.

Popular culture supplies most of the meanings that make up the medium. As I have already suggested, and as numerous scholars have established, the discourses of popular culture are not neutral. The medium, consequently, is more than a simple structure that has developed by chance and now happens to prefer some meanings over others. The medium is ideological.

Stuart Hall provides a description of ideology that pertains to this conception of the medium. Ideology, he says, is “the web of
meanings and discourses, the strings of connotation and their means of representation, within which social practices, consciousnesses, identities, and subjectivities are placed" (Grossberg & Slack 1985, p. 89). To say that the medium is ideological means that it consists of particular webs of meanings and discourses with particular strings of connotation and particular means of representation. When the texts and artifacts of popular culture influence the medium—when Barbie or the evening news do their work—they help to establish a particular range of languages, concepts, categories, and images that people use both “to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” and to construct their own and others’ identities and subjectivities (Hall 1983, p. 59). Because all experience occurs within the medium, all experience is ideological. Indeed, the medium is the webs of meanings and discourses, the strings of connotation, the concepts, categories, and images that Hall describes as the components of an ideological system.

The medium, then, provides possibilities for experience and interpretation that are congruent with its ideological structure. But when the medium creates one configuration of realities, it displaces other possible configurations by rendering them unreasonable and locating them outside the horizon of probable interpretations. At any given point in time the medium limits the range of socially constructed scenarios that we might accord the status of reality. And as the term ideology suggests, the medium’s configurations and tendencies serve particular interests and often come to “dominate the social thinking of a historical bloc” (Hall 1983, p. 59).

An empowered social group can construct texts and artifacts that advocate conceptions of “family life, civil society, gender and economic relations” that become entrenched as part of the medium’s ideological structure (Hall 1985, p. 93). At each of these contested sites the medium makes possible a range of interpretations that comply, to different extents, with dominant interests. So the medium tends to reify a particular range of perceptions and to limit the possibilities for new, perhaps radical, perceptions and interpretations.

One example that illustrates how the rhetoric of popular culture helps to create the medium’s ideological structure is the treatment of crime and criminals in popular television news magazine programs. Maria E. Grabe (1999) assesses tabloid programs like Inside Edition and Hard Copy, and more traditional programs like 48 Hours and 60 Minutes, and finds that in their coverage of crime these programs construct a morality based upon clear distinctions between good and evil, and the marginalization of African Americans as criminals and women as helpless victims. Grabe links these assessments to Carey’s ritual view of communication and demonstrates that these programs help to construct our “net” (or medium) of social relations because they create a moral order that imposes control and reaffirms power relations.

J. M. Fishman (1999) examines two television crime programs, America’s Most Wanted and Cops, and finds that while they feature different narrative forms, they serve to reproduce the dominant philosophy of criminal justice. America’s Most Wanted accentuates ordinary citizens as the heroes who solve crimes, often despite the legal system, while Cops accentuates the heroic actions of police officers. Though the programs advance different narrative forms and thus provide the symbolic resources for different interpretations, they still replicate the “central notions constituting the dominant hegemonic order”: the notions of a punitive legal system (p. 283). Both Grabe and Fishman illustrate how popular texts create the medium’s symbolic forms. The texts they examine produce narratives, characterizations, and visuals that then become strategies for future interpretations of events and issues.

The medium’s tendency, then, is to direct those who live within it toward interpretations that serve dominant sets of ideas, interests, and values. The medium presents these dominant ideas, interests, and values as inevitable, and thus reduces the possibilities that other ideas and interests might guide experience. Its ideological character generally remains unexamined, even unnoticed, so that the realities endorsed by the medium seem natural and objective, a matter of common sense. The medium thus exerts powerful pressures and constraints on human interpretation and action, and the discourses of popular culture are forces that both shape and express the medium’s structures.

Because the medium limits interpretive possibilities, it pro-
vides a sense of permanence to the world. It exerts "certain real pressures and limits—genuine determinations—within which the scope and commitment of individual action and gesture must be defined" (Williams 1977, p. 99). These determinations, however, do not guarantee one specific outcome. Instead they set boundaries within which a range of outcomes is possible. That is because the medium always contains perspectives and interpretations that diverge from the established range of alternatives, even if they are not customarily featured.

And while the medium's structures might seem to be objective conditions of existence, they actually are the result of previous discourses, interpretations, and arguments. Determinations, in this sense, are social constructions that exist in the ongoing medium of communication. Because the structures of permanence are created and sustained in communication, they can be changed through communication as well. Thus, the texts and artifacts of popular culture are sites of contest where different social groups work to advocate or to resist dominant meanings (see Storey 1993, p. 13). Their influence is a function of the access they have to the means of communication and the extent to which they offer convincing interpretations that become part of the medium's structure.

Williams (1977) notes that no structures of meaning exist passively. They have "continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified" (p. 112). Because those structures are never totally exclusive, they cannot guarantee the elimination of interpretations and arguments that challenge dominant interests and values. People are not only born into and shaped by their social medium, they also contribute actively to it and can transform it via specific acts of communication. The medium, in William's words, is "continually resisted, limited, altered, [and] challenged" (1977, p. 112). While the medium possesses a definite continuity, there is also some indeterminacy about the various directions in which it might continue, and that indeterminacy makes it possible for critics of the dominant structure to reform the medium so that alternative realities that oppose established interests become more probable.

All of this is to say that the medium bequeaths to us our common sense. Certain meanings and definitions occur to us more easily (we are quick to think of Saddam Hussein as an evil tyrant), some kinds of arguments are more commonly available (it's easier to construct a case for self-defense than for pacifism), and certain symbolic forms present themselves more vividly (the quest story reproduces our desire to settle uncharted domains and thus justifies various explorations). While the dominant conceptions are most readily deemed reasonable, the empowered structure's domination is never total because the medium never completely excludes alternative concepts and interpretations.

These manifestations of language—the meanings, definitions, arguments, and symbolic forms that make our common sense—exist in material form in the sinews of the medium. They are concrete instances of communication that reinforce the medium's prevalent interpretations, or that call to attention less prevalent minority interpretations that the medium does not feature, but that it contains nonetheless. So presidential speeches and Fox news accounts contribute to the medium a range of interpretations about the nature of unrest in the Middle East and the United States' responsibility to intervene in that part of the world. The Guerrilla News Network and the Friends Committee on National Legislation contribute their interpretations, too, but given the established structure of the medium and the relative lack of influence these organizations enjoy, those minority interpretations don't find the same audience that mainstream ideas do. The medium, nonetheless, is a site of contest. And into that contest enter the variety of texts and artifacts that make up popular culture. Barbie reinforces one set of values and Anna Quindlen reinforces another, The Lion King proffers one symbolic form and Thelma and Louise proffers another, Friends suggests one perspective on relationships, Star Trek suggests another, and Dr. Phil and Judge Judy advocate a third.

The conception of the medium I have outlined here accounts both for permanence and change within a given social structure. Determinations are a part of the medium's structure that establishes a sense of permanence, and constrains thought and action. But those determinations are themselves social constructions present in the ongoing medium of communication. Because the medium is a product of rhetorical discourse, it is malleable; it is created, shaped,
and can be altered through interpretations and communicative practices that extend the medium's current horizons or reshape its internal dynamic. The medium sets conditions that are not of one's own making, but within which one must act either to reaffirm those conditions or to call them into question.

Kenneth Burke's well-known account of the unending conversation provides a clear summation of how people are born into a social medium of communication that establishes limits and pressures on human action, and yet can be altered through rhetorical intervention. I cite the passage here in full so we can see how it illustrates the idea of the medium that I have developed in this section.

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (1973, pp. 110-11)

We enter a parlor, and we must. No choice exists but to find ourselves in the context of language and tradition and power that is the medium of existence. And we enter late. Again we must. Entrance is into an ongoing flow of communication, a world of texts and artifacts and interpretive strategies, and no one is present who was not late. No one currently present, as Frank Lentricchia (1983) states, "was there at the beginning, when the conversation started" (p. 161). The origins of this medium, the initial premises of this pervasive and enveloping "conversation," are forever inaccessible; no one knows more than what has been gleaned from the discussion, a discussion comprised of various texts—the interpersonal, academic, scientific, religious, and of course popular texts we encounter throughout our lives.

Our entrance into the parlor does not guarantee equal access to the conversation, but once we have "caught the tenor of the argument," we begin to participate. How we participate is constrained by the conversation's structures and determinations—its limits and pressures—so that we cannot do or say or believe simply anything. The history and current status of the medium render legitimate a particular range of topics and particular groups of contributors; if you don't speak the idiom, your access to the conversation is limited. And to learn the idiom is to commit to an acceptable way of talking about the legitimated topics. But our participation, nonetheless, is influential. We influence those actively engaged in the conversation and, perhaps more important, we influence the medium of the conversation itself. Our interjections shape the medium so that new narratives and characterizations are possible, and so that new interpretations and actions gain entrance into the discussion. So while we help to shape our own experiences, we also propel the medium forward; we help to sustain and to alter its existence, and in so doing to establish the conditions into which others will enter. Through the discourses of popular culture that we create and interpret, we participate in the continual creation and re-creation of the medium within which reality is shaped. And when we depart, we leave behind an ongoing medium into which other interlocutors will come, always late, always shaped by conditions for which they are not responsible, and always engaged in the conversation which continues to shape the medium.

Ethical Dimensions of Popular Culture and Popular Culture Criticism

Although I have referred to different kinds of texts in my discussion of the medium, I have made no effort to distinguish between texts that are a part of popular culture and those that are not. This is because I believe that any text can become a text of popular culture. I find most useful the fairly simple definition offered by Barry Brummett (1991): a popular culture is comprised of the texts and artifacts to which most people in a given social group have easy
access (p. xx). We can easily identify some texts as texts of popular culture—television shows and newspapers, for example. But while we typically do not give the label "popular culture" to a long address by the U.S. Secretary of State to the United Nations, that address can become a text of popular culture as it is reproduced in segments by the news media, or extolled by some commentators and lampooned by others. Thomas Rostek (1999) notes that critics need make no distinctions between politics and popular culture or between artifacts of high culture and low culture (p. 237). Elizabeth W. Mechling and Jay Mechling’s (1991) analysis of civil defense campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s illustrates how a myriad of texts entered the domain of popular culture and propounded themes and metaphors that influenced American thinking. They analyzed newspaper and magazine articles, government and social movement pamphlets, speeches, television shows, movies, editorials, survey results, architecture, novels, and scholarly articles by historians, sociologists, and scientists; all of these became texts of popular culture.

Popular culture is comprised of the texts and artifacts that work most actively to win public favor and shape public sentiment (Brummett 1991, p. xxi). Any text’s most significant public influence is its influence as a text of popular culture. That influence is not restricted to whatever immediate results might follow from the text, but is most pronounced in the maintenance or alteration of the medium. This is because the medium provides the resources by which people make sense out of their experiences and bring order to their worlds, and that influence stretches far beyond any immediate decision to support a policy, buy a product, or adopt any other mind-set or engage in any other action. The discourse of popular culture constructs ethical codes as it advocates particular forms and strategies of interpretation. Its ethical effects lie in the symbolic worlds and identities that it creates.

Brummett (1991) argues that when people learn how to interpret their experiences and their worlds, they also learn to be a particular type of person. They construct an identity out of the same symbolic resources they use to construct the world. He states: “The process of socializing people, begun in childhood and continued throughout life, is the process of showing people how to order the world and simultaneously to construct themselves within those orders. When we know how to make sense of the world we also, then, know who to be in that world” (p. 82). Every discourse, as it enters the domain of popular culture and shapes the medium, advocates that its audiences assume a particular character and adopt particular ethical qualities. And in its endorsement of whatever virtues it features, the discourse is itself an ethical act and thus subject to ethical judgment, for it works to shape the minds and souls of those who consume it.

The medium functions in two basic ways. It provides the resources by which each person constructs a self, and it provides the resources by which each person constructs a world. The rhetorical critic’s primary ethical responsibility is thus to disclose the ways in which the texts and artifacts of popular culture might influence the configurations of the medium.

The rhetorical criticism of popular culture can help to avert the possibility that some specific vocabulary, some one mode of explanation and thought, might become reified in the structures of the medium and thus secure the permanent establishment of a particular social structure. Richard Rorty (1979) identifies this possibility of reification as “the dehumanization of human beings” (p. 377): when a single view of any dimension of human reality becomes entrenched as the view, humans do not recognize their ability and attendant responsibility to participate in the production of their worlds. If a limited range of views dominates completely, it “provides a defense behind which social prejudices and interests lie hidden and thus protected” (Gadamer 1976, p. 93). The concept of the medium provides the framework for a critical perspective that will strive to make evident the prejudices and interests that undergird popular vocabularies and theories, and thus to establish the possibility for alternative interpretations.

We can ground this critical perspective in the postulate that the medium’s established structures are never totally dominant. While they do guide most interpretation and experience, the prospect remains for interpretations that question and perhaps change the established medium. Alternative meanings are always available. The
Raymond Williams's (1977, p. 116) cogent argument for the availability of alternatives in history helps to explain a critical perspective that is informed by the concept of the medium. Williams writes, "It is at the vital points of connection, where a version of the past is used to ratify the present and to indicate directions for the future, that a selective tradition is at once powerful and vulnerable." A tradition is powerful because it is adept at "making active selective connections." Because the tradition is established, its links to the present and future seem obvious and appear as common sense. A tradition is vulnerable, however, because alternative records remain "effectively recoverable" and render accessible "opposing practical continuities." While these opposing continuities are accessible, they do not present themselves as readily apparent; they do not stand within the medium's established forms because the discourses of popular culture do not reinforce them as obvious interpretations and meanings. They are marginal, not central, to the popular medium.

One task of the rhetorical critic is thus to "re-read culture so as to amplify and strategically position the marginalized voices of the ruled, exploited, oppressed, and excluded" (Lentricchia 1983, p. 15). A critic can demonstrate how accepted interpretations are just that: interpretations. And the critic can then point to alternative interpretations that typically are marginalized but that can help to explain in nontraditional ways the discourse or event in question. This critical activity can divulge how the texts and artifacts of popular culture help create the medium by sanctioning conventional or unconventional symbolic forms and strategies of interpretation. These forms and strategies influence the medium's composition and endorse a particular range of experiences and understandings. How a particular message or set of messages confirms or challenges the medium's dominant structure is not necessarily obvious. The critic can illumine which is not obvious and reveal how discourses influence, and are influenced by, the medium within which they are articulated. Rhetorical criticism, in this view, elucidates how humans have made and continue to make their medium or world of experience. It elucidates, also, how they can develop alternative meanings and thereby remake that medium.

The case of Christian feminist discourse illustrates how a particular tradition can be both powerful and vulnerable, and how critical intervention can reshape the medium through the creation of alternative meanings (Bineham 1993). A dominant tradition in orthodox Christianity describes God as exclusively masculine and thus legitimates the domination of men over women. Church leaders from Jerome in the fourth century to Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century to John Calvin and Martin Luther in the sixteenth century produced numerous documents that restated a specific message: males were superior because they possessed God's image to a greater degree than did women and because the female body was a source of debasement and inferiority. Numerous popular speakers and writers reproduce these characterizations in the medium of twentieth-century evangelical Christianity. People like James Dobson, head of Focus on the Family, use their writings and radio and television shows to articulate interpretive codes that render key scriptural passages to say that women should be submissive to men and rely upon them for protection, teaching, and authority. This dominant tradition is powerful because it contains the prominent symbolic codes that many Christians use to construct their views of women.

But this tradition is also vulnerable, for it contains alternative codes and texts that interested parties can recover and use to create oppositional interpretive possibilities. Many Christian feminists, for example, see the Bible as the basis for their tradition, and call attention to egalitarian texts that have been submerged within the dominant tradition but that provide a biblical basis for nonpatriarchal structures in the church and in society. They affirm the Bible as a central text but posit interpretive codes that yield feminist readings of those texts. One example of such a code is the location of authority in female experience or in the intersection between female experience and scriptural texts. This code counters the dominant code, which locates authority solely in specific scriptural texts, and it has specific implications for biblical interpretation, as it leads to
an emphasis on female role models and images within Scripture. To cite such role models and images affirms women’s experiences and illustrates how the dominant interpretive tradition has ignored portions of the scriptural text. Christian feminist texts thus provide a critical intervention that reveals how humans have constructed their medium of experience and suggests ways to remake that medium. And significantly, the critique of orthodox and feminist texts serves a similar function.

This kind of critical activity is an ideological enterprise because it engages the critic in the struggle either to maintain the medium’s established structures and meanings, or to disrupt and displace those established structures and meanings in order to make possible alternative experiences and interpretations. The critical activity I advocate here does not merely explain how the medium is constituted through discourse. Criticism, instead, is an active force in the processes of constitution; it helps generate the histories and vocabularies, the theories, concepts, and interpretations, and the narrative and symbolic forms that comprise the medium’s structures. Criticism becomes every bit as political as the texts, artifacts, and events that it examines. We can thus conceive of rhetorical criticism as a form of social, cultural, intellectual, and political intervention into the medium’s structure. It is a way to participate in the ongoing construction of the medium in which people live.

We can see in this perspective one clear way in which the analysis of popular culture advocates ethical codes. When we construct the kinds of analyses I describe above, we advocate a second persona. We say to our audiences that they should become aware of and challenge the dominant meanings to which they are most accustomed. Even if, given the choice, they choose to reject subordinate meanings in favor of dominant meanings, we still have suggested that they should have a choice, that they should see the world as a puzzle of symbolic forms and competing interests rather than as a master narrative or a set of established truths given by God or by nature. To advocate that view is, at the least, to advocate a relativist rather than an absolutist ethic. But while the suggestion of a worldview is one way in which criticism posits an ethic, it is not the only way, nor perhaps is it the most significant.

Communication Ethics, Media, and Popular Culture

Brummett (1991) emphasizes another way in which the type of criticism I describe here serves to construct ethical codes. He notes that the primary goals of criticism should be to raise people’s consciousness about how the dominant medium limits their interpretive possibilities and to expand the range of symbolic forms by which people create their realities. When a critic teaches people how they are encouraged to structure their worlds now and how they might structure them in the future, that critic produces discourse that is as much involved in the creation of identities as the texts and artifacts of popular culture that the critic examines. “To the extent that experience is reality,” Brummett writes, “and experience is created through symbolic ordering, then teaching people how to order is the process of teaching people who to be and how to make the world” (p. 102, emphasis added). To suggest interpretations, in other words, is to suggest identities.

When we ask people to recognize the possibility of multiple ways of ordering the world, we ask them to embrace an ethical and political code that calls them to challenge established ways of ordering that world. Criticism, whether in academic journals, newspaper columns, or classroom or coffeehouse conversations, becomes a form of political action. And when we recognize it as political action, we see clearly that it advocates an ethic, a course of action of one kind or another and a way of being of one kind or another. It is a statement about how people should live. “When people learn that a particular way of making sense of a rhetorical transaction is one option for experiencing rather than the option, then the partiality and limited nature of that logic makes hegemony partial and limited, too; and nothing could be more oppositional” (p. 104). So the rhetorical criticism of popular culture advocates ethical codes because it encourages people to decode texts and artifacts oppositionally, or at least to recognize the possibility of such oppositional readings.

The Epideictic Center in Popular Culture and Rhetorical Criticism

I can summarize my argument about the relationships among the medium, popular culture, and criticism in several basic points. The
texts and artifacts of popular culture exist in a reciprocal relationship with the medium of experience into which all people are born. Those texts and artifacts help to construct the medium because to greater or lesser extents they reproduce or challenge the traditional and dominant structures of meaning that comprise the medium. But those texts and artifacts are themselves produced within the medium and according to its logics and symbolic forms. Any medium makes some meanings and interpretations reasonable and others unreasonable. It thus endorses a particular manner of understanding; it makes a limited range of experiences probable for those who live within it. A particular text or artifact may not have, in and of itself, a clearly evident persuasive goal or result. But any discourse will influence the medium. It may reinforce those meanings and structures already dominant and thus help sustain the medium, or it may alter those structures in some significant or insignificant way.

Criticism is one form of discourse that helps to shape the medium. While one important source of such discourse is the professional critic, I have also intimated in this chapter that all people are critics and that criticism can appear just as surely over a beer as in an academic journal. Whether we realize it or not, whenever we engage the texts and artifacts of popular culture, we engage in critical activity because we make choices about what to accept, what to question, and how hard to work at the processes of interpretation. If we raise this everyday critical activity to a place of conscious attention, so that we retrain our critical capacities and refresh our repertoires of interpretive possibilities, we prepare ourselves to discover more fully the ethical dimensions of popular culture, of the critical process itself, and of the medium that both shapes and is shaped by popular and critical discourses.

Two examples related to the war in Iraq can help to illustrate the principles of the medium and the importance of critique. Both examples demonstrate the influence of symbolic forms in the framework of the medium: the first example features metaphor and the second features narrative.

Metaphor in the Medium

Since the beginning of the first Gulf War in 1991, Americans’ hatred for Saddam Hussein has been palpable. President Bush has called for his execution. Colin Powell pronounced in his February 2003 speech to the United Nations that Saddam’s “inhumanity knows no limits.” And in Minnesota, where I live, one citizen remarked after Hussein’s capture, “I hope he ends up being dragged through the streets of the United States” (Sternberg, Olson, & Meryhew 2003). These comments are representative of most Americans’ general sentiments toward Saddam Hussein.

But the United States has not always harbored such ill will toward Saddam, and numerous leaders with worse records don’t incite our wrath like he does. Since 1990 we have consumed a steady diet of messages telling us that he is an evil tyrant whom we should fear and hate. The characterizations of Saddam directly after his capture are consistent with that theme, and they fuel and justify that hatred.

One characterization tells us that Saddam is an object of disgust. He is “bewildered” and “bedraggled,” a “rat,” a “caveman,” a “vagrant,” and a “hobo” (Schechner 2003). After his capture a video clip entered the domain of popular culture; we saw over and over again via cable and network outlets and via the Internet the video of a doctor checking Saddam’s hair for lice and probing inside his mouth with a tongue depressor. This characterization is no accident. The checkup video was part of a White House public relations plan designed in case of a capture. A director of strategic communications gushed that Saddam helped “in ways we never dreamed possible—he allowed himself to get into such a disheveled state and to look so haggard” (Schechner 2003). In essence, he played directly into the predetermined characterization.

A second characterization suggests that this capture is a watershed event. President Bush asserted that Saddam’s apprehension marks the end of “a dark and painful era” and signals that “all Iraqis can now come together and reject violence and build a new Iraq” (Bush’s comments 2003, p. A8). House majority leader Tom DeLay
pronounced that "today our nation and our world are safer," as if U.S. citizens and military personnel were in more danger the day before Saddam's capture than they were the day after (Milbank 2003, p. A1). One Minnesotan predicted that "our troops can be sent back home," and Minnesota state representative Peter Adolphson remarked that Saddam's capture "will discourage further terrorist attacks on our troops" (Sternberg, Olson, & Meryhew 2003). Each of these comments presumes that his capture marks a significant turn in the war in Iraq and in the war against terrorism.

These characterizations are significant because they sustain the metaphor that justifies most U.S. foreign policy: the "nation-as-person" metaphor (see Lakoff & Johnson 1999, pp. 533-36). The numerous justifications for this war—the search for weapons, the need to stop terrorists, the desire to free the Iraqi people—are grounded in this metaphor. We had to stop Saddam either to defend ourselves or to rescue others. These self-defense and rescue scenarios are powerful justifications because they resonate with our national psyche; they are consistent with our self-image and our core values.

But this metaphor has its downsides, too. Since it encourages us to see a nation as a person, it implies not only how we should think about Saddam, but also how we should think about Iraq and the Iraqi people. Any metaphor features some concerns and hides others, and this one is no different.

First, the metaphor focuses on an individual and hides systemic issues. This fits nicely into the narratives of rescue and defense: Saddam Hussein is the villain, the Iraqi people and the world community are the victims, and the United States is the hero. But it diverts attention from other factors that contribute to the situation in Iraq: economic difficulties, ethnic rivalries, religious conflicts, and political factions. When we see the state as a person, we simplify these complexities out of existence.

Second, because the metaphor features the United States as hero, it diverts attention from our complicity in the creation and maintenance of those complex conditions. It hides motives such as the desire for inexpensive oil, the desire for profits by oil companies, the desire to finish the job left undone in 1990, or the desire to shift attention from the economy. When everything is the fault of one evil man, we are not inclined to look in the mirror.

Third, the metaphor frames how we think about Iraqi civilians. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson note that in a world of nation-persons, less industrialized countries are conceived as backward and underdeveloped children who must be disciplined into maturity (1999, p. 534). One Iraqi man told the New York Times that although he hated Saddam "to the core of my bones," he felt an unexpected sympathy for him. "I feel sorry for him," he stated, "to be so humiliated. It is as if he and Iraq have become the same thing" (Schechner 2003). Perhaps this metaphor explains why Americans tend to measure the war's cost in U.S. lives: we see a Saddam in every Iraqi person.

While the nation-as-person metaphor influences how we think about Iraq and Saddam Hussein, we can imagine its even more significant influence when we recognize that the metaphor is part of the medium; as we employ it in discourse and in interpretation, we imbue the metaphor more deeply into the structures of the medium. Its repetition in this historical context makes more likely its use in future contexts. The metaphor becomes a part of who we are. And of course the critique of this metaphor calls this process to consciousness and enables us to live more thoughtfully in the world of popular culture. But as the next example shows, metaphor is but one of the symbolic forms that comprise the medium.

**Narrative in the Medium**

Humans are storytellers. We make decisions based upon the narratives we deem most believable. Some stories become dominant. Their plot and moral assume a featured place in the medium. Officials repeat them in various contexts and cite them to support policies and actions. The more this repetition occurs, the more likely we are to accept those stories uncritically.

The tale of General Hussein Kamel illustrates this phenomenon well (see Ackerman 2004). Kamel was Saddam Hussein's son-in-law and supervised Iraq's weapons production until he defected in August 1995. He provided to the United Nations materials that contained evidence about past weapons programs. This prompted
Iraq’s government to release documents that indicated they had lied about their efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction. Kamel returned to Iraq in 1996 and was promptly assassinated. Kamel’s story became international news and provided justification for U.S. policies during both the Clinton and Bush administrations. Officials referenced the story repeatedly to justify efforts toward regime change.

In February 1998, for example, President Clinton stated that “Iraq still has stockpiles of chemical and biological munitions,” and cited as evidence Kamel’s revelations to the United Nations. National Security Advisor Sandy Berger said that Kamel’s defection led Iraq “to reveal additional weapons stockpiles and production capacity it had insisted it did not have.” Secretary of State Madeleine Albright pronounced Kamel’s defection “a turning point” in Iraq’s efforts at deception. And Defense Secretary William Cohen said that because of Kamel’s defection, “Iraq confessed to having materials and munitions it had lied about for years” (Ackerman 2004).

The Bush administration also uses the Kamel story to justify foreign policy. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stated to Congress that Kamel provided important information unavailable to weapons inspectors, a claim repeated by Vice President Cheney in August 2002. Secretary of State Colin Powell stated to the United Nations in February 2003 that Iraq’s admission that it produced nerve agents came only “as a result of the defection of Hussein Kamel.” President Bush asserted in October 2002 that Iraq “was forced to admit that it had produced more than 30,000 liters of anthrax and other deadly biological agents” only after “the head of Iraq’s military industries defected.” Kamel’s defection, Bush concluded, revealed “a massive stockpile of biological weapons that has never been accounted for” (Rangwala 2004).

The point of the story is clear: Iraq had weapons of mass destruction; its leaders lied about their existence; Kamel revealed the truth about Iraqi weapons programs. Despite the numerous references to this story, several important statements received no public attention until February 2003, when United Nations authorities released a transcript of Kamel’s interview. They have received only scant attention since then.

Kamel stated, for example, “I ordered destruction of all chemical weapons. All weapons—biological, chemical, missile, nuclear were destroyed.” When asked about anthrax, he stated that “nothing remained.” When asked about the nerve agent VX, he asserted that “the program was terminated” and “we changed the factory into pesticide production.” And when queried about prohibited missiles, he said that while “they had blueprints and molds for production, all missiles were destroyed” (Rangwala 2004). All of this occurred in 1991. Kamel revealed the information to the United Nations in August 1995, and that same month it appeared in a CIA intelligence report. So while the Clinton and Bush administrations used the Kamel story as evidence for the existence of weapons and as justification for military strikes against Iraq, Kamel actually attested to the past existence of such weapons and stated unequivocally that all of the weapons had been destroyed before Clinton took office.

We could offer many explanations for this. We could say that Clinton and Bush lied about the existence of weapons. We could point to a conspiracy to mislead the American people. We could presume that imperialist ambitions or a desire for personal revenge led our leaders to engage in a campaign of misinformation. Critics of both administrations have offered all of these explanations. But we need not surmise evil intentions to explain this phenomenon. A simple communication principle will suffice: stories take on lives of their own. They embed themselves in the structures of the medium and ensure that we see what we are prepared to see. We believe evidence that supports the narratives that frame our perceptions, and we ignore evidence that contradicts those narratives. Perhaps we will be better prepared to confront our problems and each other if we recognize that even those with whom we most vehemently disagree do not necessarily operate from surreptitious and evil motives. They may simply be doing what we all do as human beings who share a unique characteristic: we tell and consume stories.

These examples of metaphor and narrative illustrate two specific cases in which both the discourse and criticism of popular culture shape the medium. Whatever the object of study, the critic’s primary task is to explicate how the medium influences the ways in which people understand, interpret, and experience their worlds.
The critic's work should make evident how popular forms and structures are part of a symbolic medium, and it should make possible alternative interpretations by calling attention to marginalized forms and structures. Embedded in this critical activity are several assumptions. One is that the discourse of popular culture has ethical effects; all of the texts and artifacts of popular culture encourage us to be particular kinds of people, and our experiences with those texts and artifacts are sometimes beneficial and sometimes harmful. A second is that the medium makes available to people a variety of interpretive strategies; we can construct ourselves and our worlds in different ways. And a third is that the rhetorical criticism of popular culture is itself an ethical act; it identifies the possibilities those alternative constructions. Criticism, like the texts of popular culture it examines, contributes to rhetoric's epidemic center, for the reality it most decisively makes is the very shape of our minds and souls.

References


Communication Ethics, Media, and Popular Culture


