# 3

# Rhetorical Methods in Critical Studies

If you are an alert reader of chapter titles, you may be wondering about the title of this one. You knew that you were going to study rhetoric, but here, apparently, is a chapter that also seems to be about critical studies, whatever that may be.

There are at least two reasons for this chapter's title. First, most of those who study the ways in which popular culture influences people are working within a general approach to scholarship known as *critical studies* (although not all of these people use the term *rhetoric*). We will look at what *critical studies* means in more detail a little later on. Second, what you do when you study the rhetoric of popular culture and then share your findings with others is known as *criticism;* you will end up writing or presenting criticism, or a critique, of the particular aspect of popular culture that you are studying. The last four chapters of this book, for instance, are examples of critical studies— of race relations in Milwaukee, hip-hop music and culture, the movie *Groundhog Day,* and the online group rec.motorcycles.

This chapter is concerned with *how to think about rhetorical criticism.* It should not be taken as a set of instructions for how to march lockstep through a term paper. The different sections of this chapter, for instance, are not a "step 1, step 2" guide to how to write a critical study. Preparing an actual critical study is like writing an essay, and you should proceed as you would for writing any essay or report. What is more important is understanding how to go about critiquing popular culture so that you will have something to say in your critique. That is what this chapter will equip you to do.

## Texts as Sites of Struggle



Before we learn more about critiquing the rhetoric of popular culture, we need to clarify two basic principles that will underlie the critical methods explained in the rest of the book. These two principles together create a paradox about the nature of texts. First, we will learn that texts wield rhetorical influence because of the meanings that they support. In other words, people make texts so as to influence others. Second, we will learn that because texts can mean different things, they are often sites of struggle over meaning (and thus, over how and what or whom they will influence). Creation of a text may be the point of rhetorical struggle. In other words, people influence each

other so as to make texts. The paradox is that a text is both a means to, and an outcome of, rhetorical struggle.

## Texts Influence through Meanings

We noted earlier in this book that texts influence people to think and act in certain ways. That influence is the rhetorical dimension of texts. Here, we need to be more specific about exactly what motivates or drives that influence: the *meanings* that texts encourage people to accept. We think or act in certain ways, in response to texts, because of the meanings that the texts have for us, and the meanings that texts urge us to attribute to our experience.

In the midst of a stellar career in professional baseball, Barry Bonds was alleged to have taken body-building, performance-enhancing steroids. A great deal of controversy arose over that discovery. Some argued that he should be banished from the game. Others thought he should be heavily fined but allowed to continue playing. Many thought that his use of legal, performance-enhancing drugs was a logical consequence of competition, and that he should not be punished for it in any way. Lots of texts appeared in the popular press, and the purpose of those texts was to urge people to attribute certain meanings to Bonds, to drugs, to professional baseball, and to the pressures of competition in our society. Some texts wanted people to think that even legal drug use was a serious offense, especially in the context of sports. Some texts wanted people to see competition as having grown out of proportion in society at large. Some texts argued that athletes should set a better example for young people, especially when it comes to use of drugs, whether legal or not. Why did all these texts create all these meanings, and why did they urge such meanings upon the public? Because *choices and actions* that the public might adopt *usually depend on meaning.* You will not think that Bonds should be banished from baseball unless steroid use means something criminal or wicked to you. And you will be moved to forgive and forget if Barry Bond's actions mean, to you, simply something that everybody does now and then.

Texts generate meanings about other things in the world. Texts also have meanings themselves; for example, Barry Bonds himself is a text, or at least a complex artifact, with meaning. Whatever influence texts have on people's thoughts and action arises from what those texts mean to them. Faced with a row of otherwise indistinguishable jugs of motor oil in a hardware store, you will buy the oil that has the most favorable meanings. Of course, advertisers for oil, gasoline, soap, and other largely similar products spend a great deal of money trying to attach certain meanings to their products, since those goods are hard to distinguish on the basis of their own intrinsic values. So if

you pick Quaker State over Pennzoil, it is because advertisers have succeeded in causing Quaker State to mean something to you that you prefer over whatever Pennzoil has come to mean.

## Texts Are Sites of Struggle over Meaning

We now have to complicate the first principle we have learned, by turning to the other side of the paradox of texts. As we learned in the first chapter, meaning is rarely simple. Instead, what a given text means, what a sign or artifact means as the result of a text's persuasive influence, is often very complicated. That is because, especially in the case of symbolic meaning, meaning itself is rarely simple and straightforward. You can see this complexity in our example of Barry Bonds. What he and his steroid use mean is being struggled over, even today, in the texts of popular culture. Within the last decade, we have seen a dramatic change in the meaning of Middle Eastern nations in the minds of Americans. These nations have "meant" either friend or foe as governments have come and gone, rebellions and terrorist insurgencies have occurred and been crushed, and relationships to the United States have varied.

The meaning of the popular music favored by young people has always been struggled over. From Britney Spears to Young Buck, these artifacts have meant one thing to their fans and another thing to parents, police, and priestesses or priests. In other words, people struggle over how to construct these different texts in ways that suit their own interests. Making a musical artist into one kind of text or another is therefore one goal of rhetorical struggle.

These meanings are struggled over precisely because of the first principle we discussed: meanings are where the rhetorical power lies. The meaning of a president's decision to send troops into action against a foreign power will have enormous payoff in terms of who runs the government after the next election. Therefore, the president's political friends and enemies will spend a great deal of time and effort urging the public to adopt competing meanings of that action. Furthermore, the meanings of the very texts produced by those friends and enemies are also at stake. The whole business of so-called spin doctors, or public opinion shapers, is to struggle over the meanings of texts themselves, so that texts can go on to influence further meanings. Scholars in the field of critical studies describe this state of affairs when they note that meanings, and therefore the texts that generate meanings, are *sites of struggle*. The idea is that struggles over power occur in the creation and reception of texts as much as (or more than) they occur at the ballot box, in the streets, or during revolutions.

The critic of the rhetoric of popular culture (which is what you, as a reader of this book, are training to become) can play an important role in those

struggles. Critics are *meaning detectives;* their role is to explain what texts mean. Rarely do good critics claim to explain the only possible meaning that a text could have. Instead, the best and richest analyses show ranges of meanings, and may explain the ways in which certain texts are sites of struggle over meaning. Because meaning is the avenue through which texts wield influence, critics work directly to explain how it is that people are empowered or disempowered by the meanings of various texts.

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**Exercise 3.1**

To better understand why meaning is the source of the influence exerted by the rhetoric of popular culture, do this quick exercise on your own or in class on the instructions of your teacher.

Think about the last article of clothing that you bought because you really liked it and wanted to own it (that is, not some socks you bought in a rush because your other gray pair had too many holes). Do some self-examination and think about what that article of clothing means to you: Does it mean physical attractiveness? Elegance? Fun in the sun? List your own meanings.

Now back up from that article of clothing and consider the meanings that you just listed. Think about other things you might do or items you might buy because of those meanings. For instance, if you bought a T-shirt because it meant summertime fun to you, what else will you buy or do to produce that same meaning? Sunglasses? An hour in a tanning booth? A Caribbean vacation? If you think about it, it is the *meaning* of these items or experiences that is primary; what you make of the tank top and the shades and the hour in the tanning booth—what these things *mean* to you—is what is going to stick with you.

Finally, think about the paradoxical nature of the various texts in this example. Some texts (such as ads for Caribbean cruises) urge you to accept certain meanings. But an article of clothing is a text that you yourself work over so as to make it support meanings that serve your interests.

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To think about the rhetoric of popular culture, or the ways in which the texts and artifacts of popular culture influence us (along with our own participation in making meaning), we need to think about what popular culture means to people—the ways in which those meanings can be multiple and contradictory, and how those meanings are struggled over. Because critics are meaning detectives, a rhetorical criticism is an exercise in showing the

influences exerted by signs through their meanings. There are many *methods* (organized, systematic, and reliable ways of thinking) for thinking about popular culture already available to you. Let's begin to consider such methods by examining the wide-ranging, loosely connected set of methods known as *critical studies*.

## Three Characteristics of Critical Studies

A large number of people all around the world are studying exactly what you are learning about here (see, for example, Foss, 2004; Storey, 2003). Working as university professors, as columnists and commentators, or as independent writers of books and articles, these thinkers and scholars are studying the ways in which experiences of popular culture influence people. Their work follows many different approaches and is based on some widely differing assumptions. But taken as a group, they comprise a loosely knit school of thought or way of thinking that has been called *cultural studies* or *critical studies*. For the sake of convenience, we will use the latter term.

Critical studies is not a professional or social club with its own set of rules. It is not a tightly knit, clearly defined, precisely delineated set of principles. Many of the theories and methods used by scholars in the field of critical studies are, in fact, at odds with one another on some important issues. Critical studies overlaps considerably with other fields such as literary studies or film studies. But there are also some principles that link these theories and methods together and help to define critical studies as a school of thought. In this chapter we will examine the principles that different branches of critical studies have in common, the theories and methods that they share. In Chapter 4, we will look more closely at some differences among a few specific branches of critical studies. Now, however, we will learn that all branches of critical studies are (1) *critical* in attitude and in method, (2) *concerned with power*, and (3) *interventionist*.

### The Critical Character

One thing that characterizes the different branches of critical studies is that they are all, unsurprisingly enough, *critical*. In this sense, the term *critical* refers to both (1) an attitude and (2) a method.

*Attitude:* The critical *attitude* is somewhat related to the everyday, colloquial sense of the term *critical*, though without its negative connotations. If you are being critical, you are disagreeing with, or finding fault with, something. In finding fault, you take apart or dissect another's words and actions, to show

their true (and pernicious) meanings. Now, critical studies is not exclusively negative in this sense, but it does refuse to take things at face value. It adopts an attitude of suspicion, in other words, in which it assumes that things are often other than (or more than) they seem. Again, this attitude is not intended to be hostile or destructive; it simply means that people in critical studies want to know what else is going on besides the obvious.

Critical studies is always looking beneath the surface. For instance, a critical scholar watching an episode of the television show *Desperate Housewives* would assume that besides being a set of interrelated stories about some unfulfilled suburban women, the show has meanings and is influencing people in a number of ways. To give another example, it is *not* being critical to say that vampire movies, such as *Van Helsing* or *Dracula,* are stories about the undead who go around biting people on the neck. Such a statement has not gone beyond what is obvious, or merely on the surface. It *is* being critical, however, to say that vampire movies help people deal with problems of conformity and industrialization (Brummett 1984). An observation like that is not obvious, but it can be an interesting insight that the critic discovers and shares with readers. So in sum, the critical scholar must be prepared to dig into texts, to think about the ways that people are being influenced as well as entertained, informed, and so forth, by such texts.

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**Exercise 3.2**

Turn to the examples of magazine ads on pages 137-147. We will refer to these ads often as illustrations of how to use critical methods. Consider Figure 3.1, the Cayman Islands advertisement. We'll think about some more specific ways to study this ad later, but for now, try to "work up some suspicions" about it. Consider these questions: What overall meanings are created in this text? The intended purpose is, of course, to persuade people to take vacation trips to the Caymans, but what widely shared meanings does the text tap into so as to lure people to the islands, and what widely shared meanings does the text reinforce or contribute to? The following are some specific clues that could lead you to become suspicious:

How is the woman in the top half of the text positioned? Consider her placement on the seat, her posture, the arrangement of her limbs, her clothing. What meanings do you think most people would reliably attribute to those signs?

Why is the photo of the attractive woman paired with the photo of attractive food? What meanings are created by the pairing?

> Based on the signs you observe in this text, what sort of audience do you think the text is designed to attract? Male or female? How about nationality or race? Does the text either use or contribute to any stereotypes?
>
> Consider the use of language in the text. What meanings are created by the pairing—or is it the opposition?—of *exits* and *entrees?* What meanings are hinted at in the assertion that the Caymans are "close to home" but "far from expected"?
>
> There are no absolutely right or wrong answers to these questions, but there are some better and worse answers! You will need to provide evidence from the text to support your claims. The point is for you to see that for this advertisement, as for most texts, there may be some interesting meanings, or influences, at work beyond the obvious ones. Note that whatever answers you come up with, they require close readings of the texts; you have to dig into them with both hands!

*Method*: Critical studies is also a *method*, a way of asking certain kinds of questions about whatever is being studied. These questions are about meaning, complexity, and evaluation.

A critical method wants to know about *meaning*. It asks, what does a text, an experience, an object, an action, and so forth mean to different people?

Rather than breaking them up into isolated parts, a critical method deals with the *complexity* of texts and experiences as they are actually experienced. Such a method asks, What are some suggested meanings in the text, what are some of their influences or effects, and how do these influences interrelate with each other?

Finally, a critical method seeks to *evaluate* that which it studies, to make some judgment about whether that object or experience's meanings and influences are good or bad, desirable or undesirable, and so forth. The methods best suited to answering these kinds of questions are sometimes called *qualitative methods* (in contrast to *quantitative methods* that rely more heavily on experimental or survey research). *Critical* is probably a clearer term than *qualitative,* however, so we will return to that usage after the following discussion of the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods.

For an example of the difference between qualitative and quantitative approaches, let's go back to the example of a critic studying *Desperate Housewives.* Some questions that might be asked in relation to that show are: (1) Did that aspirin commercial half-way through last night's episode increase sales of that particular product? (2) Does the show as a whole series affect

how people understand gender roles? (3) How should we understand the ways in which the show and its characters are viewed in moral or ethical terms in an era when more and more people at least say that they are concerned with morality and ethics?

Now think about the best ways to answer those questions. Questions 1 and 2 are not critical questions, by and large. They might best be answered by survey research; you could simply go out and ask people about their aspirin-buying habits or their views on gender. Or they might be answered by experimental manipulation of variables, in which you compare the aspirin-buying habits and gender views of a select group of the show's viewers against a control group that does not view the show. Clearly, survey and experimental research (rather than simply sitting in a chair and musing about the answers) provide better ways to answer such questions. Both survey and experimental research are considered *quantitative* methods because many of their findings will be expressed using numbers (the numbers of those who buy more aspirin will be compared to the numbers of those who do not, and so forth).

Question 3 is a little different; it is more complex, and might be answered in more than one way. You could answer it quantitatively, by surveying people as to their reactions, or by experimentally comparing those who saw the show with those who did not. But if you share the assumption with which we began this chapter—that an important dimension of influences and effects is meaning—then it is clear that these quantitative methods will not answer such a question adequately.

Question 3 becomes a critical question when you start to think about what ethics and morality in *Desperate Housewives,* or in American society as a whole, mean. This is a question that the critic must address. But asking an audience about meaning is usually not sufficient. You can ask people what the morality of the series means to them and get an answer, but that is not a sufficient and efficient way to determine meaning, for three important reasons.

First, meaning is complex. We have already discussed the idea that a given text or artifact means different things as it is considered within different contexts or cultural systems. Even within a single culture, a text will usually have many different meanings. We have noted how contradictions in meaning occur for many artifacts. Opposing meanings might be found in texts that are sites of struggle. All of this means that few people who are not accustomed to thinking about wide ranges of meaning will be able to say, comprehensively, what a text or artifact means. Texts usually have many more meanings than most people are able to see.

Second, people may not be able to articulate meanings. We learned in Chapter 1 that people participate in making meanings, but that does not mean that they can always say how they do so. A meaning detective might consider asking people to say what some text means. But some people are not very good at saying what a text means to them, even though it may mean a lot. This does not mean such people are unintelligent, it means that intelligence, and an ability to detect meanings, comes in many forms. Some meanings may be nonverbal, intuitive, or emotional, and therefore not the kind of thing that can easily be put into words. It may take a critic who is trained in talking about meaning to articulate what certain texts mean.

Third, meaning is sometimes *beyond awareness,* so that people may not consciously know what a particular text meant to them. They may not even be aware that they are being influenced by certain texts. Participation in making meaning need not be done intentionally and with full awareness. Most people do not go through the kind of conscious introspection and probing of meaning that you are becoming acquainted with in reading this book. So for many people, artifacts may have meanings of which they are unaware, and therefore meanings that they could not report.

Critical studies is qualitative because it is concerned with qualities more than quantities—and that is another way of saying that it is concerned with meanings. The critic's job is to explore what a text or artifact means, including its different or contradictory meanings as well as the ways that meanings are struggled over, forced upon some people, and rejected by others. As critics reveal the *meanings* of texts and artifacts, they are simultaneously doing two things:

1. Critics are *explaining the rhetoric* of popular culture, since, as we discussed above, what texts and artifacts mean are the ways in which they influence people.

2. Critics are showing *how to experience life* by demonstrating how texts and artifacts might be understood, the meanings that can be found in them. When we can see a different set of meanings in a conversation, or a film, or some music, we can experience that little part of life in a new way.

We have seen earlier in this book that people make sense of, or find meaning in, signs and artifacts as they experience them. To have an experience is to organize signs and artifacts and make them meaningful. For example, take two people watching a parade go by. One is filled with patriotic fervor at the flags and bands. The other is more cynical and not very patriotic, and every flag and band prompts her to grouse about the nation and its policies. These

two people are finding very different meanings in the artifacts that go past them, and it would also be fair to say that they are constructing very different experiences for themselves.

The critic's job is to demonstrate ways of experiencing parades by explaining the different ways that parades (or films, or sporting events) mean. But the critic does not have to step into the skins of these two people to show what a given parade definitely meant to a particular person. That would be impossible to do, since nobody can see completely into another's mind. Northrop Frye (1964, 63) makes a useful distinction that explains what the critic does instead: The critic shows what people, in general, *do,* not what specific people *did.* The critic does not say, "Here is what that parade meant to Juan on that particular day." Instead the critic says, "Here is one way that this parade might be experienced (might have meaning)." In doing so, the critic shows his or her reader how meanings might be constructed and how life might be experienced.

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### Exercise 3.3

This exercise is designed to help you to understand the kinds of questions that are critical, that look into meaning, as opposed to the kinds of questions asked by other methods such as experimentation or survey research. You will find some questions listed below. For each question, determine (a) what methods, steps, or procedures would allow you to answer that question, and (b) whether it (or some aspect of it) can be answered critically.

1. Why do some people think that the world is coming to an end?

2. What caused World War I?

3. What motivates Michael Moore to make his films?

4. Does my car need a tune-up?

5. Does television fairly represent all races in the United States?

6. Is television more violent than movies today?

*Note:* You may need to break some of these questions up into issues that can be dealt with critically and issues that cannot be. To answer some questions you may have to count, compare, or observe something as well as apply critical thinking about meaning and evaluation.

## Concern over Power

The second main characteristic shared by most varieties of critical studies is one that you are already familiar with: a concern for power. Critical studies examines what power is or what it has been understood to be, and how power is created, maintained, shared, lost, and acquired. Critical studies acknowledges that power is often secured through the more traditional routes of elections or physical force. But within critical studies there is also an awareness, stemming from the characteristic "suspicion" that we discussed earlier in this chapter, that power is seized and maintained in other, less obvious ways: in architecture, in classroom layouts in public schools, in social norms for proper behavior during movies and sporting events—in other words, in all the experiences of popular culture. As noted at the beginning of this book, the empowerment and disempowerment of whole groups of people occurs bit by bit, drop by drop, in the moment-to-moment experiences of popular culture. The rhetoric of popular culture, or the ways in which popular culture wields its influences, therefore has a lot do with power.

In thinking about empowerment and disempowerment, critical studies assumes that although they occur from moment to moment in the experiences of individuals, they follow a pattern set by groups. It is as large classes that people tend to be empowered or disempowered. Of course, individuals do things that empower or disempower them individually. Being elected to the U.S. Senate is personally empowering, immoderate consumption of alcohol is personally disempowering, and so forth. But critical studies assumes that most of the time, people experience power in ways that are similar to the experiences of other members of their groups. If a child is disempowered, according to critical studies, it is because nearly all children are disempowered as a group.

The major demographic categories that have most preoccupied scholars in critical studies have been those of gender, race, and economic class. There are other categories one might consider, including age, religion, sexual/affectional orientation, body type or shape, and degree of physical ability or disability. Actually, the list of such categories is potentially endless, and may vary from one time or situation to another.

## Critical Interventionism

We have learned that critical studies is critical in attitude and method and is concerned with power. A third and final characteristic is that it is *interventionist.* That is to say, critical studies is explicitly concerned with *intervening,* or getting involved in problems in order to change the world for the better.

A critic wants to step into the lives of his or her readers and give them ways to see and experience the world differently.

The interventionist nature of critical studies is really an outgrowth of its critical attitude and method and its concern for power. We noted earlier that the field of critical studies attempts to show people how to experience life, or how to find life meaningful, in particular ways. That goal implies that people have choices among different ways to live their lives. If people have choices, then they can be influenced or taught to make sense of experience in certain ways as opposed to others. The critic's job is to show how experience might be understood, and in doing so to give people options for experiencing their lives. As a critic, you cannot help but be interventionist, because any time you show people different ways of doing things, you have intervened in their lives and changed them in some way.

For example, there are powerful social and political interests in our culture that for decades have encouraged consumption of food, fuel, consumer products and other goods. From television ads to government and industrial press releases, we are told that it is good for the economy for us to buy as many things as we can. We are constantly urged, for example, to strive to "keep up with the Joneses."

From time to time, however, an ecological movement springs up that urges people to find different meanings in the process of buying and consuming. People are encouraged to see acquisition of one product after another as unnecessary and harmful to the environment. The ecologists who urge people to see consumption in this way are doing exactly what rhetorical critics do; they are saying, "Look at this plastic hamburger carton this new way, rather than that old way," and "Buying a new gas-guzzling SUV every other year means a negative effect on the environment as much as it means a positive effect on the economy."

Good critics do just that sort of thing. They show us how to think about and to find meaning in certain things, how to experience certain texts and artifacts; in so doing, they try to change us. It is almost always liberating to realize that you have more options in deciding how to experience life, to be able to see and understand experience in more than one way, to be able to find many meanings in a situation. For that reason, good rhetorical criticism is liberating. It liberates you, the critic, because it gives you a chance to probe into and develop some of these other potential ways of experiencing and understanding. And good rhetorical criticism liberates your readers and listeners as they share the new insights that you have gained. Rhetorical criticism is always judged, therefore, in terms of the insights it provides into how people experience the influences of popular culture, and whether it expands the options that people have for ways of experiencing that influence.

We are now ready to consider some of the ways that critics go about thinking about the rhetoric of popular culture. This chapter will soon shift into a different mode, so be warned: The following sections do not describe steps to follow in a prescribed order, nor do they give directions for writing or presenting criticism. Rather, the actions described here are ways to think about how people experience and what their experiences mean.

In thinking about such issues, critics have to make choices or decisions about what to study, what assumptions to make about what they study, and so on. Therefore, the rest of this chapter will lay out choices for you to make, but it will *not* tell you what to do. Critics' choices about what to study, and how to think about those objects of study, will direct their attention in different ways, thus exposing different dimensions of meaning. Thinking carefully about these choices is especially important if the texts under consideration are sites of struggle over many possible meanings; in this case, critics must decide which of those meanings to focus upon. In the next part of this chapter we will examine some of the *continua,* or ranges, of choices that are available to critics.

One important thing that rhetorical critics must consider is what the *object of criticism* will be. By object of criticism we mean the experience that the critic wants to analyze. These objects of criticism are usually, but not always, texts rather than single signs or artifacts. The critic must identify a text and place it in context; we will refer to this identification and placement as *positioning the text*. Obviously, a first step in positioning a text is to find, or identify, a text that you would like to study.

## Finding a Text

A fundamental choice in thinking about a rhetorical criticism is that of selecting a text. You will recall from the first two chapters of this book that a text is a set of signs that work together to influence people. Another way to think of a text would be to look for a set of signs that are taken together as creating an interrelated set of meanings. It is important for you to find a text that will be exciting for you to analyze, a text that you will be able to say something about, and a text for which you have some new insights. There are two sources of texts that you should consider.

First, consider your own experience as a source of texts. What have you experienced recently, what has happened to you, what have you seen or heard, that interests you? Have you seen a film or a television show that "turned on" your critical attitude, for instance—one in which you thought that there was something going on beyond the obvious? Can you point to

some complex experience, such as going to a wedding or a commencement ceremony, that might usefully be analyzed as a text? Have any of your recent experiences seemed to have something to do with power? Could you point to some magazine article or book that you recently read that worked to empower or disempower people within its own small space of influence? Finally, have you recently experienced a text that excited your interventionist impulses, or your desire to get involved somehow (for example, did you see a movie that you thought was racist in subtle ways, so that you wanted to expose that racism)? These are questions that you might ask in relation to yourself and your own experiences of texts. Remember to look widely for different kinds of texts; we will look more closely at a range of possible choices in a moment.

A second source for finding a text is theory. This term in this context will need some explaining. A *critical theory* is an abstract statement about how people construct meaningful experiences. In contrast, a *criticism* (or *critical study*) is an illustration, or modeling, of that theoretical statement. A theory explains what people do in general, how they make sense of their experiences for the most part. A critical study is an application of a theory—it says, "That generalization can be seen at work here, within this limited frame of space and time."

For example, the critical study that is reprinted here as Chapter 8 began with a theory that said, in a nutshell: Usenet groups on the Internet create a prime rhetorical requirement for participants that they persuade their readers that what they say represents real experience (Brummett 2003). This is especially true for the Internet since checking on the reality of what people post there is difficult. Notice that this theoretical statement is about how people experience: it makes an assertion about what people do to make their claims believable when they go online to post a contribution to a newsgroup (or chat room). Notice that the theory is also abstract or general; that is, it talks about Usenet groups, or the posting of comments, on the Internet in general, not about a particular comment or posting.

The actual critical study that was based on that theory went on to illustrate, or model, that abstract statement with some specific examples from the Usenet group rec.motorcycles. The study showed that members of that Usenet group who post comments yearn especially to make their postings believable. Many of them express the persona of rough, tough, bikers, yet they might all be mild mannered professors for all we know; on the Internet, all there is to see is words on the screen. So the study examined ways in which posters manipulated language to increase the credibility of their contributions, to persuade readers that they really were as bad a bunch of hombres as they claimed (see Brummett 2003). Such strategies include providing a great many highly detailed examples, for instance.

A reader of that study should have been instructed by the study in how to use the theory to understand other experiences, in other contexts. After reading such a study, a reader might forever after be alert to strategies used online, in Usenet groups, blogs, and so forth, designed to persuade readers of the truth of their claims. That reader will therefore experience the Internet more richly, noticing and understanding a little bit more of this aspect of life.

Too often, what you learn in one class is never called upon in other classes, especially across disciplines. But in using theory as a source in selecting a text for critical analysis, your own reading and prior education become valuable resources. In psychology, sociology, anthropology, English, and many other kinds of classes, you have doubtless read critical theories (even if the authors you read did not always refer to their works by that name). For example, some theories describe, in general terms, how people behave in businesses or other organizations; such theories might be illustrated with case studies of what happened at IBM corporate headquarters in New York, or at a Westinghouse plant in Indiana. Some theories describe how people in general understand poems, and will be illustrated by an analysis of a particular poem. Some theories describe the steps that people go through in grieving for the dead, and will give some concrete examples of the experiences of particular mourners.

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**Exercise 3.4**

Think about theories you have read in other classes. If you need a reminder, look at the books for those classes and find "theory" in the table of contents or the index. Describe a theory that you have encountered that describes in general what people do, how people behave, how people experience life or find it meaningful. Summarize that theory in a few sentences. When you first read the theory, was it illustrated with a critical study? Did an example come with it? How would knowing that particular theory equip you to understand other experiences beyond the example provided in that particular critical study?

In other words, suppose you read a theory in a sociology class that made some general statements about the behavior of people in nursing homes. The theory may have come with a critical application, specifically studying the behavior of people in a nursing home in a New Jersey town. Does knowing that theory allow you to make interesting connections to the ways people behave in other institutions, such as public schools, summer camps, or the armed forces?

Theories are a useful source for texts because they tell you how to look for a text. For instance, you may never have thought of the stages of a personal relationship as a "text." But after reading Knapp and Vangelisti (2005), you might well be able to see a unifying thread linking several events that have occurred in a relationship that you have had, and that unifying thread might constitute a text. Knapp argues that relationships develop or deteriorate in clear stages; his identification of those stages provides a useful system of categories for analysis. In this way, Knapp's theory of relationship stages calls your attention to a unity of influence among signs, or a text, that you might otherwise not have been fully aware of.

Whether you find a text based on your own experience alone, or one that is suggested to you by theory, you will have some important choices to make about how to identify and understand the text. Critical scholars do not always agree about how to make these choices; we will examine some of those differences between scholars in Chapter 4. Here, however, we will examine some of the ranges of choices that are available to you. We will refer to each range of choices as a *continuum*.

First you must choose the *type of text* you want to study: discrete or diffuse. As we will see, a given set of signs could be seen as either discrete or diffuse, depending on the critic's intentions. This choice may be represented on a continuum as follows:

## The First Continuum: Type of Text

discrete                                                                                      diffuse

The terms *discrete* and *diffuse* should be familiar to you from Chapters 1 and 2. A discrete text is one with clear boundaries in time and space. A diffuse text is one with a perimeter that is not so clear, one that is mixed up with other signs. Whether a text is discrete or diffuse depends on how it is experienced, understood, or used. The critic must decide how he or she wants an audience to experience, understand, or use a text. A set of signs that could be seen as making up a discrete text from one perspective might also be seen as only part of a wider, more diffuse text in someone else's experience.

We are used to choosing to see some texts as discrete and some as diffuse just as a matter of habit, but good critics always consider the full range of choice available to them. The magazine ads in Figures 3.1 through 3.11 (pages 137-147) are usually taken as discrete texts; it is clear where they begin and end, and it is usually assumed that they will not spill over into the rest of the magazine. But a critic could choose to see each ad as only one component of a more diffuse text, such as a text comprising a dozen ads of a similar type.

The start of school might be understood as a diffuse text, including such signs and artifacts as paying tuition, meeting new friends, finding classrooms, buying books, buying clothes, going to parties and receptions, and so forth. But the critic could choose to take only the first meeting of one class as a more discrete text in its own right. On the other hand, your sister's wedding could be seen as a text with a rather discrete, concentrated core of signs made up of the actual ceremony and the reception afterward. But a critic may choose to include in the text some signs involved with the preparation for, and aftermath of, the wedding, thus making it more diffuse.

It may help you in settling on a text to identify where it falls on this first continuum of discrete to diffuse. What are the consequences of choosing a more discrete or more diffuse type of text? Let's consider discrete texts first. Discrete texts are usually easier to identify because the signs that make up the text are close together in time and space; you do not have to "hunt" for them. The signs that make up the discrete text of the film *Ray,* for example, are all right there on the screen. Because the signs are together in time and space, people are generally accustomed to identifying such a text as a text. Both the sources and the receivers of messages that are discrete texts can count on that agreement; the people who made the large poster advertisement on the side of a city bus, for instance, know that you are likely to perceive and understand it as a text in and of itself. You do not have to work very hard to convince people that the magazine ads in Figures 3.1–3.11, the television show *Pimp My Ride,* or a billboard are texts, each one a discrete thing or event. In dealing with discrete texts, because people are already aware of your text as a text, the insights that you will have to offer will usually be concentrated on particular details of the text. Your criticism will point to new ways to experience that text and others like it; it will call our attention to meanings that can be found in the text.

By contrast, diffuse texts are harder to identify. In fact, very diffuse texts may be impossible to identify completely—because they are so diffuse. Your task may be to indicate most of a set of signs that seems to be contributing meanings toward the same influences, without being able to identify every sign that could conceivably be part of the set. So if your diffuse text is the start of school, you may have to give an indication of what the text is by naming several of the signs that it comprises, rather than every conceivable one.

Because you have to work harder to pull together a diffuse text, people generally are less likely to identify as a text whatever you are describing as one. When texts are diffuse, people may not be consciously aware of the unity of influence going on among the several signs scattered here and there. Everyone knows that people prepare their income taxes, for instance, but not everyone may be accustomed to seeing that activity as a unity, to seeing all the steps

and experiences surrounding that preparation (over weeks or months, at home and in accountants' offices) as a set or a text. Because seeing the preparation of income taxes as a text may be something new for people, the insights offered by your critique are more likely to be both about the text, and about the existence of the text itself. You have something interesting to say about the meanings and influences of the signs that make up the experience of preparing income taxes, but you also have something interesting to say in presenting that experience to us as a text.

We have identified a text as a set of signs that work together toward the same influences, which means toward the same meanings. *Identifying meanings* is central to finding a text. What makes a group of signs "hang together" as a text is the fact that you can say that they work together to offer those meanings. But who determines what meanings are? And how do we know what these meanings are? As critic, you also have choices in determining the sources of meanings that a text might have; these choices are represented on our second continuum, which illustrates the range of possible sources of meanings:

## The Second Continuum: Sources of Meanings

broad                                                                      narrow

One of the basic principles that we discussed at the beginning of this chapter is that meaning is usually complex and many-layered, and may even be self-contradictory. For those reasons, it is rarely the case that a critic can completely explain the meaning of a given text. Instead, critics must narrow their focus to some of the more interesting, influential, or controversial meanings. This second continuum can help to guide a critic in making the choice of which meanings to study. This continuum reminds the critic that some meanings are widely held; we will call these *broad* meanings. Other meanings are held by only a few people, or arise only in particular circumstances; we will call these *narrow* meanings. Of course, it is important to remember that we are dealing with a continuum rather than a sharp distinction here; for most texts there is a whole range of meanings that are *more* or *less* widely shared, in the middle of the continuum.

For instance, what do the book and film trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* mean? A critic who sets out to study that movie must choose which meanings to focus on, because they cannot all be analyzed at once. Widely agreed upon meanings would include simply what the film's basic plot or story line is. It might be widely agreed upon as a depiction of conflicts among different nations or societies, for instance, and attitudes toward global politics or war in general might shape some of the most widely shared meanings. On the other

hand, there are more narrowly held meanings that might be a fruitful object of analysis as well. Since global conflict and war are constantly reoccurring, people in different eras and locations might attribute narrower meanings to *The Lord of the Rings.* People living during the Cold War of the 1950s-1980s might see the trilogy as meaning the struggle between communism and capitalism. In the early years of the twenty-first century, the trilogy may be read as meaning the global conflict between Western, secular, industrialized societies and fundamentalist, Islamic societies. Affluent people living in suburbs may find meanings in the trilogy that parallel their fears of the movement of drugs, violence, gangs, and poverty out of the city and into their neighborhoods.

What are the consequences of the critic's choice of meanings to analyze? On the one hand, more widely shared meanings are often more important meanings just because they are so common. It may be important to show what most people think a text means, because meaning underlies how texts influence people. More widely shared meanings are also often easier to demonstrate in a critical analysis; they encounter less resistance because they are already understood by many people. However, because such widely shared meanings are already understood by most people, explaining them further may not go very far toward changing the thinking of those who read or hear the critical analysis. People are less likely to have their eyes and ears opened to a wider range of meaning if they are exposed only to meanings that they already know.

Less widely shared meanings do have the potential to widen the horizons of people who may never have thought of finding such meanings in a text. For instance, several university and professional sports teams have for years had American Indian mascots: the Cleveland Indians, the Atlanta Braves, the Washington Redskins, the Florida State Seminoles, the Marquette Warriors, and so on. The most widely shared meanings for the texts of these mascots were fairly innocuous: They simply "meant" the teams, and occasionally they might have served as reminders of the history of a location and so forth. But critics have begun to point out that a narrower meaning, first held by Indians themselves, was much less innocent. For many Indians those mascots have "meant" racial insults and a cavalier and patronizing treatment of their cultural traditions. Through choosing to reveal and analyze these narrower meanings, critics have succeeded in persuading some teams (for example, those at Stanford University) to replace their mascots (at Stanford, from Indians to the Cardinal). That critical effort was not without difficulty; many people claimed to see no derisive meanings in the mascots. In fact, one consequence of choosing to focus on less widely shared meanings is that they are harder to demonstrate to a wide audience of people. But the payoff in terms of changing potentially harmful or insulting meanings that can be attributed to some texts and signs can be greater.

Paying attention to the full range of choices available to the critic, from narrow to broad, is important in revealing texts as sites of struggle. Only by showing what Indian mascots mean (narrowly) to the Menominee or Ojibwa *in contrast* to what they mean (broadly) to many non-Indian sports fans could critics show how those meanings are in conflict, and how Indian mascots are therefore sites of struggle. This continuum reminds the critic of a full range of possible meanings, and thus of the likelihood that those meanings will be in conflict with each other in many texts.

**Exercise 3.5**

One of the clearest examples of signs with both broad and narrower meanings is the cowboy. Look at the advertisement for Fort Worth, Figure 3.2, which prominently features both pictorial and verbal references to cowboys. Now, imagine that you were going to call up one hundred people at random across the United States and ask them what "cowboy" means. I think you would find a lot of agreement: "Cowboy" has meanings of rugged individualism, physical and moral toughness, a strong sense of justice, simple and clear values, honesty and fair play, mastery of the frontier, mastery of firearms, and so forth. Think of movies or television shows you have seen that reinforce those meanings, such as *Tombstone*. Make a list of those meanings.

Now think of specific groups of people in particular times and places who might have narrower, different meanings. To the extent that cowboys in the American west pushed Indians, Mexicans, and other native people off land they had occupied for centuries, the cowboy may have more negative meanings than are found in the wider (and whiter) culture. Also, critics of both President Ronald Reagan and President George W. Bush often accused them of acting like "cowboys" on the world stage, and the use of that term was not flattering. Think of how these narrower, more negative images are created and perpetuated in texts of popular culture, such as the movie *Unforgiven*. Make a list of these different meanings and compare it to your first list; write down an explanation of the differences you observe.

## Defining a Context

Once a text has been found, the next choice the critic makes in positioning the text is to place it within a *context*. Texts do not occur, and they are not "read," in a vacuum. An important part of being rhetorical is existing in relation to some problem or situation. In other words, signs influence people for a

purpose, to some end, in some context. Questions arise, then, of what causes people to construct texts, as well as who is influenced by the texts, why they are influenced, and under what circumstances. Answering these questions entails identifying a context for your text. Here, too, you as a critic have a choice, which is displayed in our third continuum:

## The Third Continuum: Choice of Context

original                                                                          new

Every text appears or is constructed during some first moment or range of moments in time and space. We may think of that moment (or moments) as the text's *original* context. The people who first gathered to hear Lincoln's Gettysburg Address occupied a moment of time and space that was the original context for that speech; a slightly wider, but still original, context was the nation that would learn of the speech within days by way of newspapers. The "first" use of a text may also, paradoxically, occur across many different moments of time and space. This textbook, for instance, is a text that appears in its original context every time a student picks it up to read it for the first time. The context is made up of the room or library in which it is read, the reading assignment, and so forth. This context will occur (or so the author and publisher hope) thousands of times a year, but it is nevertheless the original context each time. Original contexts are defined by the intentions of those who make or who use texts, as well as by the "real-life" contingencies of when the texts, in fact, first appeared.

On the other end of the continuum, texts are often moved or appropriated into new contexts, ones that are different from those in which they originally appeared. In the 1980 film, *The Gods Must Be Crazy,* an "ordinary" soda bottle falls from its original context, an airplane, into the Kalahari Desert (a new context), where it is taken to be a message from the gods by the Bushmen who find it there. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is now studied in public schools as an example of beautiful language, succinct and efficient wording, and great ideas; the original context of commemorating a battlefield has been largely lost to the sixth grader who is being tested (that is, encounters the text in a new context) on the address next week. Of course, changing the context of a text also changes many of its meanings, though usually not all of them.

The critic has a *choice* that he or she must make about the context in which to position the text. The text may be considered in its original context, as it was first experienced by people. For instance, a critic might study the meanings that the Three Stooges film shorts had for their original audiences in the 1930s and 1940s. Or, there are two senses in which the text may be considered within a new context.

First, the critic might examine ways in which people, acting on their own initiative or through happenstance, experience texts in a new context. For example, the critic might think about how the meanings of Three Stooges shorts change as they appear in the 2000s, as television reruns or on compact discs.

Second, the critic might propose a new context for consideration by the readers of the criticism, even if the text has not actually been experienced by these readers in that context. By suggesting that a text be seen in an entirely new context of the critic's proposing, the critic can often fulfill the important function of showing people more of the ways in which life is made meaningful. For instance, the critic might suggest to her or his audience that they think about the Three Stooges reruns as political commentary on the present presidential administration. Clearly, this is nothing like the original context. But if the reader begins to think about how those short features might be understood (or found meaningful) as being about the president, new insights about politics and our present situation might be opened up to that reader. The placement of the Stooges, or any text, in a radically new context like this should not be done capriciously or simply for fun. The new context and text should "fit," and the new placement should teach us more about what both text and context can mean.

In a more serious vein, it would be interesting and insightful for a critic to ask readers to think about Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as being about the ongoing conflict around the Persian Gulf, especially in Iraq—the desert battlefield of that particular ongoing war, and those who fall in that conflict. The critic can, in a sense, ask Lincoln to speak across the years and miles to a new context. We might learn a great deal about what war means to Americans and how Americans experience war, by placing that text in this new context. Correspondingly, we learn more about the text of the speech itself by observing the additional dimensions of meaning that are highlighted in a new context. For many people, the meaning of the speech's original purpose (dedicating a battlefield) has been lost; meaning might be restored to the speech by repositioning it in relation to a new battlefield.

Choosing to place a text at one end or the other of the continuum, or somewhere in between, entails certain consequences. To consider a text within its original context, the critic must do some historical work first, by discovering what the source of the text (the writer, speaker, film producers, and the like) and the original audiences were thinking about. If we are to think about the film *Gone with the Wind* as a rhetorical text in its original *context,* then we will have to look at the concerns of American moviegoers in 1939 and examine the meanings that the film may have had in that context. It may be illuminating, for instance, to think about the characters and events of the film in light of growing fears over war and destruction in Europe and Japan, and to ask how the film influenced the audience through the meanings it offered, given the context of the outbreak of World War II.

A second consequence of placing a text within its original context is that historical accuracy becomes an important criterion for judging a criticism. Whether a criticism faithfully reports the meanings that a text had in its original context is an important consideration when that context is where the critic places the text. Today's readers of the criticism will learn about how to experience and to find meanings in life if they can understand the patterns of meaning that were followed at different times in the past.

If the critic chooses to place a text in a new context, especially if it is a context entirely of the critic's choosing, different consequences result. The context will be suggested more by the critic and the critic's insights than by historical research. Historical accuracy becomes much less of an issue, and instead, the quality of the critic's insight becomes a criterion for judging the criticism. What does it teach us, one might ask, to think of the Three Stooges films as being about today's political context? Clearly, accuracy is not the issue in that case, as no one is claiming that those films either addressed, or intended to address, today's politics. What matters is whether or not there are insights to be gained; unless placement of a text in a new context is enlightening, it becomes just a game that is best avoided by serious critics.

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**Exercise 3.6**

This exercise asks you to become a collage artist. A *collage* is a work of art formed by pasting together many clippings of words or images taken by the artist from other sources such as magazines or newspapers. In a sense, collage art is the art of choosing to see texts in new contexts.

Look at the Dodge pickup truck advertisement in Figure 3.3 (page 139). Think about the meanings that this ad had in its original context (attempting to sell a large, powerful vehicle in a popular magazine). Think about the meanings offered in this ad that would be attractive to most general readers.

Now let's place that ad in an entirely new context, one of our own making. Suppose, for example, you were a collage artist and you wanted to make a visual statement about the reasons behind United States dependence on foreign oil. What images or words would you cut out from this ad to place in the new context of your collage art? Try to think of other words, images, or ideas that this ad might seem to refute or contradict. What meanings does the ad offer in the context of these new words, images, or ideas? To whom would such an ad appeal, and how would those meanings influence people? Why would a critic choose to examine a new context of this kind?

The last issue that we will consider in thinking about how to position a text is the *relationship between text and context,* and how that relationship works. There is no single way to view that relationship; the choices that are available to you are explained in the fourth continuum:

## The Fourth Continuum: Text-Context Relationship

reactive                                                                                    proactive

Sometimes, texts may be analyzed for the ways in which they *react* to a context, which is the left side of the continuum. People have a clear perception that certain challenges, problems, or possibilities exist (creating a context), and that texts are devised so as to react to that context. People may be out of work, racial tensions may be high in a certain locale, perhaps there is a hole in the ozone layer, and so forth. Under such circumstances, texts are designed or are used to react to these perceptions of a preexisting difficulty. For instance, during the 2004 presidential elections, the film *Fahrenheit 9/11* appeared and attempted to influence many people to vote against President Bush, to assign negative meanings to his reactions to terrorism. A presidential election is a clearly perceived existing context for most people, many of whom choose reactive texts in the forms of lapel pins, bumper stickers, and yard signs that react to that context and urge certain meanings upon others.

At the other end of the continuum is the possibility that texts might be analyzed for the ways in which they are *proactive*—that is, the ways in which they create their own contexts. That is not to say that these texts appear spontaneously or for no reason. Rather, the most important or interesting context within which to consider them is the context that they create themselves. Much advertising works this way. For example, many products, such as the cooking gadgets, mini-ovens, hotplates, wiener steamers and so forth advertised on late night television are simply not needed; they respond to no real-life problems. Instead, they *create* a context of need for themselves, proactively.

Politics often generates texts that are most interesting for the contexts they create. In the 2004 presidential elections, a group of "swift boat veterans" generated a series of advertisements calling into question the truth of stories of candidate John Kerry's Vietnam War service. On the one hand, these texts questioning Kerry's heroism were reacting to the existing context of the presidential election. On the other hand, they created a new context for the campaign of doubts about Kerry's war record. Senator Kerry had to spend a great

deal of time and attention responding to those charges; they had become a context that he could not ignore.

Most texts in and of themselves are both reactive and proactive, just as a debater's speech both responds to an earlier statement and in turn becomes the basis for the opponent's reply. A critic must choose which sort of text-context relationship to feature in his or her analysis. But an analysis might address a mixture of both kinds of relationships (a point in the middle of the continuum).

For example, racial conflict is usually a preexisting context of some level of importance in our country, although it varies in terms of immediacy and the amount of attention paid to it. Since the late 1980s, a series of films, such as *Mississippi Masala, Crash, Remember the Titans, Friday Night Lights, Do the Right Thing, Mississippi Burning, Driving Miss Daisy, Jungle Fever, Malcolm X,* and *Falling Down,* have both responded to that perennial context and ignited a new and intensified context of racial concerns. This new context has generated more widespread public discussion of racial issues. The consequences of choosing whether to identify texts as reactive or proactive to their contexts are important. As a result of that choice, the critic must look either backward or forward—back to a context to which a text or texts react, or forward to determine new contexts that texts create.

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**Exercise 3.7**

One of the clearest ways in which texts are proactive is when they sell the public new technologies. Think of the last time you went to buy a new cellular telephone and discovered that the store was full of appeals to buy the latest and most expensive model, which was full of all kinds of features you never knew existed before entering the store. So it is for most technology. Notice the fairly typical advertisement for Sanyo products in Figure 3.4. Do you suppose a context already existed in which most customers were sitting around thinking, "Oh my, if only I had a cell phone with a ten megapixel LCD screen"? Likely not. Messages selling cutting edge technology must create their own context of desire, need, or technological requirements in an audience. Think of other categories of products that are sold to you by creating a context that you never thought of before encountering the rhetorical text. Make a chart of the products and the context that they created.

*Intertextuality: When the Context Is another Text*



One of the most interesting, and commonly occurring, textual strategies that depend on manipulation of context is *intertextuality*. Intertextuality occurs when one text includes part or all of another text. The new, container text then becomes the context for the older partial or complete text. In this way, meanings associated with the older text become incorporated into the new text, contributing to its rhetorical impact. Intertextuality can be a powerful and efficient way to create rhetorical impact because it makes use of packages of meaning that are already there in the older text. To some extent, nearly all use of signs is intertextual, since most signs occurred earlier as parts of other texts. Every sentence we speak is intertextual, using as it does words that bring with them layers of meaning from their previous uses. But intertextuality in the sense we are using it appropriates rather specific texts from the past so as to use particular meanings associated with those texts.

One of the clearest examples of intertextuality in popular culture is *sampling,* a musical technique found especially in hip-hop. This has been a strategy used in hip-hop for years. Coolio's *Gangsta's Paradise* samples heavily from, of course, Stevie Wonder's *Pasttime Paradise.* Wonder's critique of materialism and living only for entertainment provided a stock of meanings

ready-made for Coolio's critique of his own urban rapper's culture. More recently, Mase's *Welcome Back* begins with a sample of the theme song from the old television series *Welcome Back, Kotter.* That old comedy featured some tough-but-lovable characters attending an urban high school. Mase's intertextual borrowing of the theme song borrowed the light-hearted, comic meanings of the original show, which were rhetorically useful in his attempt to update and repair his earlier "bad boy" image from the *Harlem World* album. Nelly's album *Suit* has a song, *Nobody Knows,* that intertextually incorporates an old gospel song, *I Ain't Noways Tired.* Nelly sings of his own history of misbehavior over and around the gospel song so as to make his journey toward stability and prosperity borrow the uplifting moral senti- ments of the older song. In that way, he leavens his own "bad boy" image with meanings given by an old religious song, perhaps from the church-going days of his youth in Austin, Texas (sorry, St. Loo, he's from the Lone Star State!). Intertextuality occurs in many more texts and on visual and verbal dimensions as well. Critics need to be on the lookout for it, as it imports meaning into a text by making it the new context for an older text.

We have discussed ways to find a text and a context. This has been a process of both discovering a text and positioning it so that we can think about it more usefully—think, that is, about what the text is, what it is trying to do, and the things to which it responds. In every case, the critic must make choices about the most interesting questions to ask about texts in context. Now we are ready to think more carefully about the text itself, and about how its compo- nent signs work together; for that, we must go further "into" the text.

## "Inside" the Text

How can we think about what a text is *doing?* How do texts urge meanings on people, and how do people accept, reject, or struggle over those meanings? We will build our discussion of the dimensions of the "inside" of texts around three categories: (1) direct tactics, (2) implied strategies, and (3) structures. These three categories can be usefully displayed as ranging across our fifth, and last, continuum:

### The Fifth Continuum: From Surface to Deep Reading

direct tactics                    implied strategies                    structures

A word of explanation regarding this continuum is in order. This contin- uum, like the others, represents *choices* that a critic can make in thinking

about critiquing a text. This fifth continuum represents whether, or how far, a critic wishes to go beyond studying the explicit and straightforward appeals that a text makes, into an analysis of more indirect and less obvious appeals.

Most texts make certain explicit appeals, which we will call *direct tactics.* Texts also have *implied strategies,* which are subtler and not always consciously intended to be perceived; these implied strategies are often the implications of some of the direct tactics that are used. And finally, any text is put together or organized in certain ways, and its various parts have relationships among themselves. These parts and their relationships make up the text's *structure.* Direct tactics, implied strategies, and structures are the sources or storehouses of meaning in a text. Which of these levels of appeals will the critic focus on? That is the choice offered by the continuum. The choice is a continuum because, although we have identified three levels at which texts appeal, the levels are not radically distinct; rather, they merge into each other.

### *Direct Tactics*

Direct tactics reveal the system of meanings, the consciousness, offered by a text most explicitly. A direct tactic is any straightforward request or prompting for you to think or behave in a certain way. It is often accompanied by a reason or rationale for you to think or act as urged. If someone says to you, "Order the steak; the lobster isn't fresh," it is clear that a direct attempt to influence you is being made. The direct tactics used in the rhetoric of popular culture are, in many ways, closest to the reasoned arguments of expositional texts that we studied in Chapter 2. Explicit claims, reasons given in support of the claims, visual images with a clear message in terms of what you are being asked to do or not to do—these are all direct tactics that you might find in popular culture.

Our fifth continuum represents a range of appeals that the critic would choose to analyze. Of all the possible choices on the continuum, direct tactics are probably the easiest appeals to find within a text. Many advertisements are full of direct tactics. In Figure 3.4, the list of technological advantages of the Sanyo camera phone may be considered direct tactics in that they explicitly lay out for a reader why this is the best product to buy. A hip-hop song urging people to fight oppression, or a rock and roll song telling people to stay off drugs, is also using direct tactics.

But not all texts have direct tactics, whereas all texts do at least have implied strategies and structures. In fact, some texts seem almost devoid of direct tactics. We have all seen our share of ads that make no explicit claim upon us, ads that comprise nothing but a brand or company name and an ambiguous visual image. Many soft drink commercials show only the product and images of happy people having fun. Similarly, a street gang's preferred hat style is usually devoid of direct tactics.

Figure 3.8, the advertisement for Chambord liqueur, is nearly devoid of direct tactics. It is heavily visual, creating a feeling of desirability in the reader almost exclusively through the careful choice and arrangement of visual signs. Nowhere in that text is there any direct appeal to go buy the product, nor are there any explicit reasons given to do so.

Because direct tactics are on the surface of the text, the critic who chooses to focus on them should first simply note what the appeals are, make a list of them, and identify what is being urged and why. The critic should think about what support or reasons were given for the direct appeals, remembering that such support might be visual as well as verbal or expositional. Finally, the critic should think about the most likely audience for the appeals, and then assess the likelihood of the appeals succeeding with that group.

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**Exercise 3.8**

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The advertisement for the drug Nexium, in Figure 3.6, is rich in direct tactics. Let us examine some of these direct tactics, using the following procedures:

1. Note specific appeals in the ad. Try to isolate particular claims or requests that the ad makes.

2. What support or evidence is given for the claims? Try to construct a diagram linking claims with support.

3. Who is the likely audience for the ad? Who is likely to buy the product? What would be the *ideal* magazine in which to place this ad? Try to assess whether the ad's appeals are well matched to that magazine's likely audience.

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### *Implied Strategies*

If critics are not satisfied with examining direct tactics alone (or if few, if any, such direct tactics exist), other choices are available to them. They can examine the implications of the signs, the relationships among them, how they are arranged, and so forth. It may be a little difficult to understand exactly what critics are looking for in examining implied strategies, and how such strategies differ from direct tactics. Perhaps a hypothetical example will help. Suppose you had a friend who was working at a bank. Suppose that every time you met that friend, his conversation would be punctuated by statements such as, "Embezzling really isn't such a bad thing"; "Gee, I think they probably don't catch embezzlers very often, especially if, you know, they don't really take very much"; "I've often thought that really smart people could get away with taking their employer's money"; and the like.

The "direct tactics," so to speak, in the text of your friend's conversation are rather straightforward; these are simple statements about the subject of embezzling. But if you considered only direct tactics, you would probably miss something else that is going on with your friend. Most people would probably realize that the *implications* of your friend's words are far-reaching; they might mean that your friend is swindling the bank where he works (or at least considering doing so), perhaps that he is even in serious trouble. You would arrive at that conclusion because your friend is saying things that you would not ordinarily expect, and repeating certain things more than is quite normal for conversation. Your friend may not even be aware of his conversational patterns. There are oddities and peculiarities, interesting things that call attention to themselves, in what your friend is saying. So acting as an everyday rhetorical critic in this situation, most of us would probably do an informal critique of this friend's text and either warn him sternly or turn him in to the police.

Every text has similar interesting quirks and peculiarities—things missing or things too much in evidence—that convey meanings in and of themselves. A critic must choose to focus on these implied strategies. Following the work of rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke, we will look at three categories of implied strategies, each of which suggests a question that you can ask about texts: (1) *association* (What goes with what?), (2) *implication* (What leads to what?), and (3) *conflict or absence* (What is against what?). These categories overlap somewhat, as we will see. The three questions accompanying them are the basis for how a critic probes a text for implied strategies.

*Association: What Goes with What?* In answering this question, the critic considers the signs that are linked together in a text. Such linkage may occur when signs are placed in the same place or within the same image, so that they seem to go together naturally. The linkage may also occur when signs appear together repeatedly; every time one sign occurs, the other sign occurs as well. For signs that are linked in such ways, the meanings that would usually be assigned to one sign are transferred to the other, and vice versa. Linking signs becomes a strategy of borrowing meaning, of moving signification from one sign to another.

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**Exercise 3.9**

Look again at the Dodge truck ad in Figure 3.3 (page 139). Think about the ways that most of the signs in this ad fit together: We see a truck placed together with a winding country road, a ranch house, a windmill, grass plains, two competition dirt bikes, and verbal references to spurs, cowboy hats, and Texas. All those elements are put with the

truck so as to lend their meanings to the truck. So what overall meaning is constructed for the truck given those associations? Consider that nationally, about seventy percent of pickup trucks are not purchased by people living on ranches who really need to haul things in the back. What does this ad tell us about the meanings those people buy when they go to buy a pickup truck? Look also at Figure 3.9, the ad for Baume & Mercier watches. The central visual element of the ad is the close embrace between mother and daughter, a physical pairing of signs. What meanings are created by that pairing, and how does that contribute to the overall meanings we might attach to the watch?

*Implication: What Leads to What?* Often, several of the elements of a text will suggest, or lead to, some other element. There are two kinds of signs that do this: *keystone* signs and *transformations.* Sometimes one sign or kind of sign assumes centrality in a text. That element may not even be the most frequently recurring sign in the text, so long as the other signs consistently imply, suggest, or refer to it. If a keystone sign were removed from the text, the whole thing would lose its current meaning. The text will not blow a trumpet and announce to you that this or that sign has more importance than others; instead, many of the "roads" in the text lead to or *imply* that sign. If it is visual, the eye will be drawn toward it consistently. If it is verbal, it will be the word carrying the most powerful meanings. We call that a *keystone* sign within a text, and close examination of that sign can tell us a lot about what the text in general means.

For instance, Bart Simpson seems to be a keystone sign in the television show *The Simpsons.* The show's attitude and many of its plot developments lead to Bart Simpson, and they keep returning to him as a key figure. Bart's contrary character can then be taken as an indication of the tone of the show and of why it is popular. In many hip-hop videos, the constant reappearance of guns, cars, attractive women, or ornate male jewelry is a keystone sign; whichever is the key sign for a particular text lends its meanings to the whole of the text.

Another way in which one sign leads to another is by way of *transformation,* or the "standing in" of one sign for another (this transformation can be detected in the iconic, indexical, and symbolic meanings of signs, discussed in Chapter 1). In thinking about the meaning of these signs within the text, the critic should ask why one sign was chosen to stand in for another in the first place, and what meanings are conveyed by such a transformation. For instance, a recurring feature of the *Matrix* trilogy of movies is an enormous Desert Eagle .50AE pistol.

It appears to be the standard sidearm for the black-suited bad guys, the "enforcers" of the Matrix. The gun is of a size and clumsiness to make it an unlikely "real life" carry weapon. So the question arises, what was such a gun doing in the films—why was that gun used and not a more realistic one? A critic might propose that the gun was really standing in for an intense fear of government or police power on the audience's part expressed in a gun that looked awesome and destructive enough to be a transformation of that fear. In the movie *I, Robot,* most of the film's action leads to the robots. It is interesting to ask what the robot is standing in for in the film. Various critics have suggested that the robot actually represents the fear of conformity, of loss of individuality; others point to concerns over corporations acquiring too much power.

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**Exercise 3.10**

Take a look again at Figure 3.4, the Sanyo ad. What are the camera phones "really"—that is to say, what are they a transformation of? What do the other visual signs, and the placement of the phones in the picture, make them? Clearly, the phones are transformations, they are celebrities. Think about how the transformation of the product into a particular kind of celebrity attaches certain kinds of meanings to the product. Look also at Figure 3.11, the ad for Three Olives vodka. What is the woman in the glass a transformation of? Look at her posture and costume, at the background visuals; what meanings do they contribute to the vodka itself? Look also at Figure 3.8, the ad for Chambord. What is the dessert in the glass a transformation of? Consider again its placement in the overall picture. Earlier we considered Figure 3.6, the Nexium advertisement, as an example of a text with a lot of direct tactics. The visual element of the text is the slice of pizza—but what has it been transformed into? Why that particular meaning; what effect does that create?

The most arresting feature of Figure 3.10 is clearly the exotic figure in the picture. The extreme differentness of this person from what most of the readers of the ad have ever encountered serves as a keystone sign in this text. That strangeness permeates the verbal references to ultimate experience and to distant lands. There may be several different ways to understand what "distant lands" or "ultimate experiences" mean, but the centrality of the picture helps us to interpret those terms as having *exotic* meanings.

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*Conflict or Absence: What Is against What?* The critic who asks this question looks for ways in which the text keeps certain signs apart. Texts do this in three ways. First, texts may *omit* certain signs. When a reader feels this

absence, notes that something that should be there is not, a conflict is created between expectations and the actual text. To locate such omitted signs, we ask what the text did not say and compare that with what it did say. We look for what is missing, especially for signs that should be there but are not.

Second, texts may show certain signs in *conflict*. Within such texts we see explicit pairings of concepts in opposition to each other. Sometimes those oppositions are in the form of contradictions, such as including signs that would not typically go with the other signs that they appear with in the text. Note that in texts of this kind, signs that are usually against or apart from each other have been paired; this unusual combination prompts us to think about the meanings that the odd pairing generates.

Third, texts may put together signs that are *not ordinarily found together*. The match-up of those signs startles or jars us; it is from the potential conflict of signs that the unexpected pairing (and thus, pairing of unexpected meanings) gains rhetorical strength.

Almost any night of ordinary television viewing will yield many examples of "what is against what" in the first sense of certain signs that are omitted. For example, women are often omitted as players or commentators from professional sports broadcasts, especially from the more popular broadcasts featuring male-dominated sports such as NFL football. Thus, over time the meaning that "Women are not athletic" is built up. Consider also the relative absence of people with physical disabilities on your television screen. Think about the relatively low representation of some cultural or racial groups, for instance of Asian or Latino people on television, despite their rapidly growing populations in this country. When texts rarely link people of color or those with physical challenges with everyday roles such as store clerks, business office workers, plumbers, and so forth, such texts serve to further a false image of nonwhites or the disabled as uninvolved in the everyday life of our country.

In other words, if ninety-nine percent of the successful professionals in the United States (such as doctors and lawyers) are *not* African American, Asian, or Hispanic (as television shows would seem to indicate), what does that seem to say about realistic career aspirations for people of color? As the public increasingly depends on television for entertainment—indeed, for a description of reality—what meanings does such an underrepresentation of people of color convey to the public? What effect might those meanings have on the members of those populations themselves?

One major absence on television is a realistic concern about money. On most television programs, you will notice that when people are finished eating in restaurants, they simply get up and leave. In reality, however, people in restaurants divide the bill among themselves, argue over who ate what, ponder the tip, and so forth. When the people on television programs *do* pay

for something (such as when they are getting out of a cab), it is done with a hurried grab for whatever is there in their purses or pockets. In reality, of course, people count their bills carefully, rub them to make sure two are not stuck together, wait for change, and so forth.

Television's silence about money becomes most obvious in commercials. Commercials are rarely specific about what anything costs; in fact, most of the time the fact that a product costs anything at all is simply not mentioned. There seems to be an assumption that everyone can afford anything; all sorts of products are depicted as being affordable by people from all walks of life.

The second way in which signs are placed against other signs, the depiction of *conflict,* is clear and straightforward. Dramatic television series almost always depict certain groups as in conflict. Terrorists are nearly always presented as Middle Eastern (specifically Arab or Palestinian) and are shown in conflict with Europeans or Americans. The popularity of Saudi or Iraqi "bad guys" on television has grown as the plausibility of Russian enemies (a former TV favorite) slips; spies on television shows now come from the Middle East instead of from the former Soviet Union. Such oppositions, or conflicts, urge upon the television audience a particular view of how the world order is structured.

The unexpected conjunction of signs that would usually be set apart from or against each other is also fairly common. In any election year, for example, we see powerful and wealthy politicians don overalls and flannel shirts to show up at county fairs to eat fried chicken and corn on the cob. The president rarely goes to 4-H shows in Duluth, Minnesota; thus, when he *does* attend such a show, the intended meaning becomes interesting and noteworthy. Television commercials often show cheap and ordinary products in contexts of great wealth.

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**Exercise 3.11**

Consider the "conflict" portrayed in Figure 3.5, the ad for Cooper tires. There are many different ways to portray conflict; when a text "picks a fight," the sides it depicts in the fight create a structure of meaning. What kind of conflict do we see here? Clearly, between a man and a woman, but what do we know about either of them? Since the woman is packing the man's belongings (presumably, for him to hit the road), think about the meanings of those belongings and reconstruct the kind of audience the ad appears to address. Consider the conflict depicted in Figure 3.7, the ad for LG camcorder phones. Who is against whom, and what are the grounds of the conflict? What does that tell us about the meanings the advertiser hopes will be attached to the product?

> Look again at Figure 3.8, the ad for Chambord. Notice the conspicuous absence of most of the model's face. What meaning is created by the absence of such a sign? How might the meanings of the text be different if her full face were shown?
>
> Consider the utterly unexpected pairing in Figure 3.10 of the person who appears to have stepped right out of a rain forest, and the delicate cup he is holding. Why are these two incongruous signs put together, and what meanings are created from the unexpected pairing?

We have been learning about three *implied strategies:* (1) *association* (What goes with what?), (2) *implication* (What leads to what?), and (3) *conflict or absence* (What is against what?). It may have already become clear to you that these categories sometimes overlap or blend into one another. One thing might "go with" another thing by "leading" to it, for instance; and being "against" one thing will often imply being "with" another thing. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the categories and questions presented in this chapter are ways to think about the rhetoric of popular culture, and such thinking about real experiences rarely falls into tidy categories. Returning to our fifth continuum, we will now turn to the third choice critics make once "inside" texts: whether to analyze those texts' *structures.*

### *Structures*

When a critic chooses to analyze a text's structure, he or she is dealing with the pattern, the form, the bare bones or organization of that text. Recall that we are considering choices, on the fifth continuum, from surface to deep reading. With structures, we have arrived at the level of form or pattern. Here, we do not ask what is said or shown in the rhetoric of popular culture, but rather what forms or patterns we can discern beneath the things that are said and shown. At this end of the continuum, signs and texts are examined to discover the most fundamental patterns that organize them, and the broad categories to which their elements belong. There are two concepts that a critic might choose to focus on that have to do with structures: *narrative* and *subject positions.*

*Narrative:* A number of scholars have suggested that texts can be usefully studied by thinking of them as *narratives,* or stories (see Jameson 1981; Fisher 1984, 1985; Aden, 1999). This is obviously true for texts that do in fact tell a story, as most films do, for instance. But clearly, a number of texts (perhaps most of them) are not narratives or stories on the surface. So what can these scholars mean by suggesting a narrative approach to the criticism of these nonnarrative texts?

They mean that critics can treat these texts *as if* they were narratives. For texts that are not narratives on the surface, this means that the deeper form or structure of the texts should be analyzed, because it is at that deeper formal level that the characteristics of narrative will be found. What does the critic look for in examining a text for its narrative qualities?

The essence of all narrative is *form, pattern,* or *structure.* The phrase "The proud African warrior" is only the germ or nub of a story because it does not flow forward; it suggests but does not follow through on any pattern. But, "The proud African warrior looked out across the grasslands as he set out on his quest" is already patterned, in two ways. First, it follows a *syntagmatic* pattern. A *syntagm* is a chain, something that extends itself in a line. We can think of syntagmatic patterns as *horizontal,* as moving in time and space. That kind of movement is what narratives do; a plot is nothing but a pattern chaining out horizontally in time and space, a series of expectations that arise and are either met or frustrated. Our sentence about "the proud African warrior" asks us to start imagining that warrior as being on a journey, in pursuit of some noble goal. We might imagine what that goal is, foresee dangers, and so forth. These expected developments will be revealed to us (or not) as the story moves on.

A second kind of pattern that this sentence follows is called *paradigmatic.* In contrast to syntagmatic structure, paradigmatic structure is *vertical;* it looks at structures or patterns derived by comparing and contrasting a given sign or text with other signs or texts that are like it. We already know that our African warrior is in a quest story; thus his story can be compared to similar quest stories: medieval knights in search of the Holy Grail, astronauts going to the moon, and so on. Much of what this African warrior means comes from that sort of implied comparison.

In a baseball game, to take another example, what develops when first Smith goes up to bat, then Jones, then Brown, will follow a syntagmatic pattern; events will follow each other in a forward-moving narrative sequence. But when a given batter is up, we might compare that batter's statistics to those of other batters, to see how this batter's performance fits into the pattern of other hitters. That second kind of pattern is paradigmatic; we are considering the paradigm, or category, of batters. The relationship between syntagmatic and paradigmatic forms is illustrated in Table 3.1.

There are really two levels of paradigmatic form, and one of them we have already examined in considering direct tactics and implied strategies. When we took a given sign and asked what it went with or went against, we were thinking paradigmatically. A second level of paradigmatic form is the level of structure. We can identify the flow, or pattern, of a given text syntagmatically. But we can also take that pattern as a unified whole and move vertically, to

**Table 3.1**     Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Forms

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| What Smith did in the last game | What Jones did in the last game | What Brown did in the last game |
| What Smith did last time up in this game | What Jones did last time up in this game | What Brown did last time up in this game |
| **Smith Grounds Out→** | **Jones Hits A Double→** | **Brown Singles Jones In** |
| What Rivera (of the opposing team) did last time up | What Johnson (of the opposing) team did last time up | What White (of the opposing team) did last time up |
| What the leadoff batter did in that movie you saw last weekend | What the second batter did in that movie you saw last weekend | What the third batter did in that movie you saw last weekend |

←Paradigmatic Comparisons→

**The Syntagmatic Flow→**

comparing and contrasting it with the patterns underlying other texts so as to construct a paradigm. For instance, one can examine any television newscast syntagmatically to identify the pattern that is followed: headline story, remote broadcast from a reporter, next news story, personal interest story, the weather, and so on. But we can also compare the entire pattern of a particular station's news broadcast paradigmatically with those of other stations, in an effort to identify the overall pattern or structure that tends to underlie *all* newscasts. Often, this construction of a paradigm or vertical form is also referred to as the construction of a *genre*.

Identification of form or structure entails asking the sort of questions that we might ask of good stories:

1. Is the pattern *cohesive,* and if not, why not? What influence or meaning occurs when the pattern is broken? Humor is often the intended result of deliberate disruptions in narrative patterns that seemed to be following the accustomed groove; examples of such humorous disruptions can be seen in many skits on the television shows *Saturday Night Live* and *Chappelle's Show.*

2. Is the pattern *recognizable*? What other texts seem to follow the same pattern, and what does their presence in that genre, group, or paradigm tell us about the meanings and influences of particular texts? A number of observers noted, for instance, that one of the strengths of President Bill Clinton as a communicator was that even when speaking on great state occasions, he seemed to be speaking within the form of a casual conversation; people in the mass audience felt as if he were connecting with them personally.

**Exercise 3.12**

We have already examined the magazine ads at the end of this chapter in terms of direct tactics and implied strategies. Still, or unmoving, visual images such as those found in magazines can also be examined syntagmatically, but such examination can be difficult, and usually involves placing oneself in the position of the reader as he or she "moves through" the ad. So in this exercise we will depart from the magazine ad to consider some films, books, and television shows.

This is one form, pattern, or structure that might underlie a text:

  a.  People occupy a distinct space

  b.  that they are not free to leave;

  c.  hostile external forces attempt to attack or infiltrate the space, and

  d.  they must be repelled or subverted.

Examine, on your own or in class, all of the films, books, and television shows from the following list with which you are familiar. You will find that all share the structure described in items *a* through *d* above. For each film, book, or TV show, identify the *surface* features (actual events, characters, and so on) that match the elements of *structure* listed in *a* through *d* above.

| Film, TV Show, or Book | a | b | c | d |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Any *Stargate* TV show | | | | |
| Any *Star Wars* movie | | | | |
| Any *Alien* movie | | | | |
| *The Village* | | | | |
| *Anaconda* | | | | |
| Any *Star Trek* movie | | | | |
| *Ghost Ship* | | | | |
| (your own example) | | | | |

What can you learn about the meanings and influences of these texts of popular culture by examining their structures? How does clarifying the "bare bones" of texts, both syntagmatically and paradigmatically, help you to understand the ways that those texts might influence people?

> A different structure underlies the following texts. This time *you* supply the description of the structure underlying all of these texts. Then identify the surface features in each that match the elements of the structure you come up with.
>
> *The Christ story*
> *Powder*
> *Phenomenon*
> *The Brother from another Planet*
> *Edward Scissorhands*
> *E.T.*

### *Subject Positions*

The Marxist scholar Louis Althusser (1971) and others (for example, Hall 1985; Brummett and Bowers 1999) have argued that texts ask those who read them to be certain kinds of *subjects*. To be a certain kind of subject is to take on a sort of role or character; these theorists argue that rather than having any single, stable, easily located identity, we do nothing but move from one *subject position* to another. In a sense, then, the power that a text has over you has a lot to do with what kinds of subject positions it encourages (or forces) you to inhabit.

Whether or not you agree with such a claim, an interesting question that can be asked of texts is, Who was this text made for—who would fit into the role of audience for this text most easily? Note that a subject position is not a character in the text itself. Instead, a subject position is who the text encourages you to be as you, the reader or audience, experience that text. Rarely will a text explicitly announce its preferred subject position for the members of its audience. Instead, a subject position, like narrative, is part of the *structure* of a text. You can think of a subject position as the missing perspective, the point of view, required for the text to make sense.

You can also think of some subject positions as *subversive stances,* positions taken deliberately by the reader in opposition to the "preferred" subject position suggested most strongly by the text. For instance, almost without exception, old "Cowboy and Indian" movies strongly encourage a white, law and order-based, pro-establishment subject position—in other words, one that will root for the cowboys. It is easier to see such films from this perspective; the films are structured toward that end. But one can also root for the Indians by refusing that subject position and taking an alternative, or subversive, one. In this way, subject positions can often become sites of struggle.

Another instance of the possibility of a subversive subject position can be seen in relation to the long-running, now syndicated television show, *Touched by an Angel.* Clearly, the viewer of that show is intended to see the film from a spiritual, even explicitly Christian, perspective, one in sympathy with the "angels" who appear as regular characters. We are encouraged to feel uplifted by the ways in which these angels intervene in the daily lives of the troubled people they encounter; it is easier to take such a sympathetic subject position that delights in miracles and divine revelations. But it is also possible to see the film from the subversive perspective of a non-spiritual or non-Christian person. Such a viewer might "fight back" against the halos and auras of light, the miracles, the divine interventions portrayed on the show and instead see them as ridiculous, as things to be made fun of. Another subversive subject position at another extreme, which your author has observed in some people, is that of an extremely Christian viewer who takes offense at attempts to portray the divine on television, who takes offense at ordinary actors claiming (even in a script) that they are angels.

Now the show itself appears to be trying very hard not to allow you these alternative positions; by the end of each episode, the creators of the series have pulled out all the stops to make you see the angelic characters as good and wonderful, and to feel assured that God's in His universe. But because every text has a preferred subject position in which it is trying to place you, it is always possible, at least in principle, to find an alternative one. Doing so may yield some interesting insights into that text.

Subject positions are defined by the type or category of person that is called to by the text: male or female, old or young, and so on. Subject positions also imply certain characteristics, such as happy or unhappy, active or passive, and the like. Finally, subject positions imply a *consciousness,* which, as we learned before, is a system of meanings linked to a group identification. Thus there is a feminist subject position that entails the adoption of a feminist consciousness, for example.

We have already considered some of these issues earlier, in our examination of the idea of context, or audience, for the magazine ads in Figures 3.1–3.11 (pages 137-147). Recall that we asked who the ads seemed to be speaking to, but we also considered alternative, or oppositional, stances that an audience might take. For instance, it seems clear that the Cooper tire ad in Figure 3.5 (page 141) is calling to a young male, likely middle or working class, a sports fan, an "ordinary guy." That would appear to be the preferred subject position, the one most obviously and easily entered into, in order to read this text. But with some effort, one could take an oppositional subject position in order to read this text. How, for example, would someone who adopted the subject position of advocate for the homeless read this text differently from someone

who adopted the preferred subject position? Consider that the absent male in the ad appears to be getting put out of his home.

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**Exercise 3.13**

You have been reading this book for nearly three chapters by now. That much immersion in any text will certainly call forth a subject position. Consider the following questions:

1. What subject position is the preferred one for this book? That is to say, who does this book "call to"? What kind of person, role, or character would find it easiest to read this book? What sorts of characteristics or consciousness are associated with that subject position?

2. Think about yourself as you read this book. You have to adopt a certain subject position in order to read it. How does that subject position differ from the subject positions that other texts—such as the text of a party you attended recently, the text of *Road Rules,* or the text of the latest Ice Cube movie—call you to?

3. Suppose you hated this book, hated the class it has been assigned for, hated the whole subject. Think of an alternative, subversive subject position you could take in reading the book, one its author clearly did not hope for. What difference would that alternative subject position make in terms of the meanings of particular passages, examples, or exercises?

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We have been learning optional ways to think about texts, once you, as a rhetorical critic, have positioned them. The kinds of close and careful examinations of texts that we have demonstrated in this chapter have provided choices in considering *direct tactics, implied strategies,* or *structures.* Only one more set of choices is necessary to consider before you can begin to produce the actual rhetorical criticism. We will now consider different ways to step back out of the text and to think about how the meanings you have discovered do social and political work.

## The Text in Context: Metonymy, Power, Judgment

Actually, the ways that we have gone about thinking about texts have always asked you to keep one eye on what is outside the text, on the real world within which texts do their work. So this next group of questions will serve largely as a way of reviewing what you have already learned about texts. In

considering, generally, what influence texts have in the social and political world, you will need to choose whether to focus on (1) *metonymies,* (2) *empowerment/disempowerment,* or (3) *judgment.*

## Metonymies

What texts do is, as we have discovered, very complex. All the ads that we have examined in this chapter are, for example, trying to influence the meanings that people assign to certain products, in order to sell those products. But critics, you will recall, are concerned with power, and with how public business is managed in the rhetoric of popular culture. So in addition to noting how ads sell cigarettes, critics will also ask about the ways in which ads, or any texts, manipulate the distribution of power as they manage public business. (Recall that the management of public business occurs in popular culture as texts influence decisions and sway meanings about important issues.)

You will recall that for reasons of increasing population, technology, pluralism, and perhaps most of all, knowledge, public issues must be reduced or *metonymized* into the signs, artifacts, and texts of popular culture. Only in that reduced form can people participate in the management of public issues, by helping to determine what those issues and their components mean. Therefore, once you have thought about what the texts of popular culture *mean,* it is important to ask how those particular meanings *metonymize* public issues.

An interesting example of the use of metonymies in attempts to manage a public issue occurred during the 2004 presidential campaign. A great deal of attention was paid to the Vietnam War records of both candidates, Senator John Kerry and President George W. Bush. Was Kerry the war hero he claimed to be? Did Bush sit out the war in a safe National Guard assignment to which he rarely reported? A tremendous amount of media coverage was devoted to treatment of those issues, television pundits debated them endlessly, guests appeared on news shows to bear witness, and so forth. Some commentators at one point noted that one might think the whole election was about what happened during the Vietnam War. So why was so much attention paid to what happened thirty-five years earlier?

Clearly, the military service of each man was being used as a metonymy of his character and fitness for public office. Was the candidate telling the truth? Was the candidate hiding behind a wall of privilege and power? Was the candidate's story consistent? By focusing on the Vietnam War record, the media and the public were in fact focusing on the wider issue of whether the candidate was fit for taking office in 2005.

## Empowerment/Disempowerment

The category of empowerment/disempowerment is fairly straightforward. It asks us to consider who is empowered and who is disempowered by the meanings that might be assigned to or generated by the text. Remember that empowerment and disempowerment mainly befall large groups of people rather than isolated individuals. Recall also that power is managed in moment-to-moment, everyday experiences (including popular culture) far more often than it is in single, grand events. How does that empowerment or disempowerment result from the way that public issues are metonymized?

In the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show, pop singer Janet Jackson suffered what was later called a "wardrobe malfunction" at the hands of fellow performer Justin Timberlake that exposed one of her breasts. An enormous amount of energy was spent among government officials, network executives, and the public at large attacking Jackson (more than Timberlake), complaining about lax moral standards on television, and demanding greater enforcement of ethical rules on television. This incident is clearly another example of a metonymy; a simple flashing of flesh became a way to work through issues of morality on the media, relations between men and women, and so forth. But if we think about why so much energy was expended on such a quick, fleeting event we will realize that the whole affair reveals a tacit understanding of the power of media today, of television, and of mainstream spectacles such as the Super Bowl. What goes on during the Super Bowl matters because that is one place where enormous cultural power is wielded.

After decades of almost complete absence, gays and lesbians began appearing on television in much greater numbers during the 1990s and 2000s, often taking center stage in situation comedies such as *Will and Grace, Ellen,* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.* These television texts metonymized some life experiences of gays and lesbians into sixty- or thirty-minute episodes. A number of critics raised the issue of whether the shows were realistic or not. But metonymy, because it is a reduction, is hardly ever completely realistic. Perhaps more important questions would be, Who is empowered and who is disempowered by these shows? Are they for the benefit of gays and lesbians or of straights? Do they tend to perpetuate the established system, the way things presently are, or do they encourage alternative distributions of power?

## Judgment

The critic is not only concerned about power; he or she is interventionist as well. The critic has some purpose or goal in mind in doing rhetorical criticism—as we noted before, the critic is on a mission. That means that for the critic, judgment of the text is inevitable and unavoidable.

Judgment runs throughout all the insights offered by the critic. In suggesting that a text means this or that, the critic is also judging it. That is because to claim that a text means a certain thing, or calls for a certain subject position, or encourages a certain consciousness, is to take a stand about what the text is doing in the world.

Objectivity is not possible for the rhetorical critic. That is not to say that merely expressing personal opinions is an acceptable alternative for such a critic. All the categories and questions covered in this chapter guard against making criticism merely an expression of personal opinion; instead, they lead the critic into making well-supported *judgments* about the material that is being studied. Such categories and questions direct the critic to give reasons for her or his judgment. Thus, the choices that the critic makes, as illustrated in the five continua presented earlier in this chapter, are not made at random, or simply for fun. They are choices that the critic must support with good reasons and evidence, in an attempt to persuade the audience who will read or hear the criticism that the meanings the critic asserts are in certain texts are really there.

## Summary and Review

The purpose of this chapter has been to help you learn how to think like a critic. In discussing the many things that rhetorical critics think about, we have covered quite a lot of concepts and terms. Does the critic have to use every term and concept included in this chapter in doing criticism? Certainly not. Remember, we have been explaining choices that are available to the critic. What should guide those choices? The critic should ask those questions that help to reveal the meanings that he or she finds most interesting and important. Let's go over some of the more important ideas in this chapter once more in a quick summary.

We began by reviewing two basic principles: that texts wield their rhetorical influence by affecting the meanings that people attribute to the world, and that because meaning is complex, texts are often sites of struggle over what the world means. Therefore, critics are meaning detectives, and their chief task is to show what signs and texts mean, and the meanings they urge upon their audiences.

Critics, working within the framework of critical studies, display three characteristics as they go about explaining meaning. We learned that critics are critical in both *attitude* and *method*; that is, they refuse to accept easy answers to the question of what texts mean, and the kinds of questions they ask about texts generally are not best answered through quantifying social scientific methods. We learned that because meaning is complex, difficult to

articulate, and often beyond awareness, the specially trained critic is in the best position to say what texts mean. In explaining meaning, the critic shows people new ways to experience life and helps people to expand the ways they have of finding meaning.

Second, we learned that critics have the characteristic of being *concerned with power.* And third, we learned that critics are *interventionist;* they want to change people by changing how they understand the world and the meanings they see in the texts they encounter in everyday life.

Having arrived at an understanding of what critical studies do in general, we explored a number of choices that are available to the critic approaching the study of a text. First, we learned that the critic must position the text. This involves finding a text, for which the critic may consult her or his own experience or theories about texts. One major choice confronting the critic is to settle on a text that is either *discrete* or *diffuse,* or somewhere in the middle of this first continuum. We also learned that the critic cannot study all the meanings of a text, and is therefore faced with the choice of focusing on either broad or narrow meanings, or analyzing the text as a site of struggle over meanings. The third choice the critic must make in positioning the text is to focus upon an original or a new context in which to place the text. We learned that the critic may study original or new contexts in which others have placed the text, or may propose a new context of his or her own if doing so will help to illuminate what the text or context means. The critic's final choice in positioning the text involves examining the text-context relationship, and deciding whether to feature *reactive* or *proactive* relationships between text and context, or perhaps a mixed relationship between the two ends of that continuum.

We learned that one important consideration for critics is the use of *intertextuality.* Intertextuality is what happens when one text swallows up, or becomes the context, for another text. We saw that texts might swallow up all or parts of another text so as to borrow meanings that the audience will attribute to the incorporated text.

Once the text was positioned, we followed the critic farther "into" the text. Here we saw that the critic's choice is whether to analyze a text's *direct tactics, implied strategies,* or *structure.* We saw that direct tactics are straightforward appeals and urgings for an audience to feel or act in a certain way. Implied strategies are subtler and more indirect, and are revealed by asking the questions associated with the categories of (1) *association* (What goes with what?), (2) *implication* (What leads to what?), and (3) *conflict or absence* (What is against what?). Structure is a consideration of the basic form or pattern of a text. Here, the critic examines both *narrative* and *subject positions* so as to reveal the underlying structures of texts.

Has this seemed like an overwhelming number of categories and concepts to consider? It probably has. Yet you should remember that we have been focusing on a critic's choices for just that reason—to illustrate the vast number of choices and options available to the rhetorical critic. No single critical analysis can possibly take into consideration all of the concepts we have reviewed in this chapter. Instead, the critic must make specific choices for how to think about texts and their relationship to the world, and then confront the consequences that follow from those choices.

## Looking Ahead

This chapter has reflected the strong conviction that critics are deeply involved in helping their audiences to see certain meanings in texts. We began the chapter by arguing that meanings are the basis for rhetorical appeal, and one clear implication of that argument is the idea that critics are also rhetoricians. Rhetoricians argue for particular perspectives and views, often against other perspectives and views.

One might finish this chapter wondering whether critics are in agreement over which meanings to reveal to an audience. This particular chapter has had very little to say about disagreements among critics. And although we have focused on a critic's choices, we have not shown one of the most important choices that critics cannot avoid—the choice of which sorts of "real life" concerns and commitments to urge upon an audience in revealing the meaning of texts. In Chapter 4, we will turn to a discussion of the particular schools of thought within which critics work. Consider these questions as you prepare to begin the next chapter:

1. What are the different perspectives or schools of thought that critics work within as they reveal meanings?

2. What specific kinds of changes or new meanings do some critics want to instill in their audiences?

3. How can criticism serve "real life" politics and social movements, so as to help people who are in need of liberation?
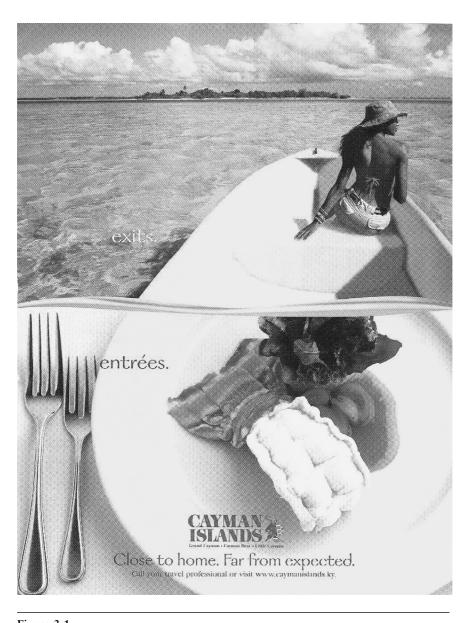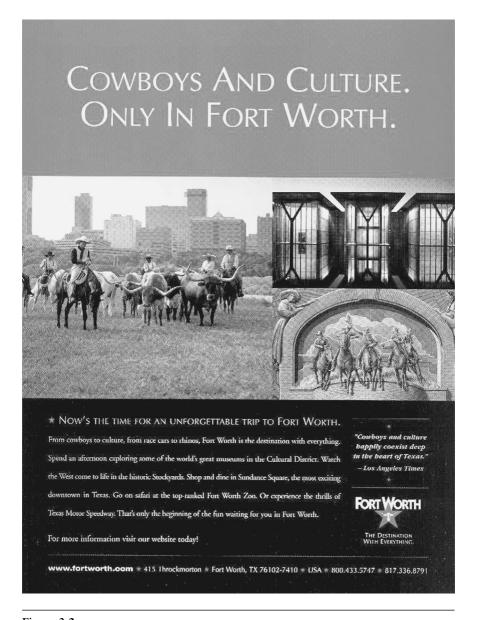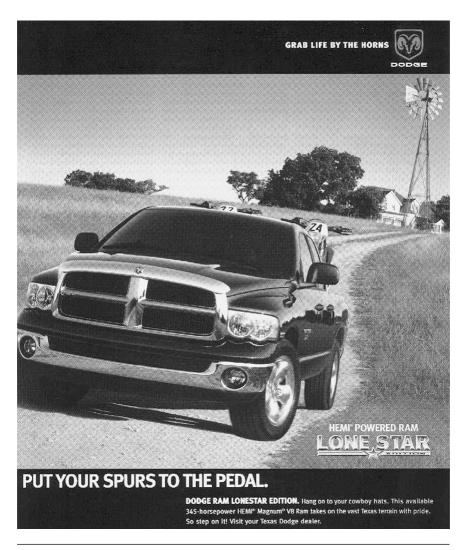
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**Figure 3.1**

**Figure 3.2**

**Figure 3.3**

140    Rhetoric in Popular Culture



**Figure 3.4**

**Figure 3.5**

**Figure 3.6**

**Figure 3.7**

**Figure 3.8**

**Figure 3.9**

**Figure 3.10**

**Figure 3.11**