Media Literacy Primer Book.

World Bridger Media

www.worldbridgermedia.com
The term “media literacy” is a bit of a misnomer. Literacy is something that we classically relate with text. As we know, media encompass wide formats (the word itself is a plural of “medium”), and its most generic definition, “mediated communication,” could mean a lot of things. Just think of the types of media we engage daily: clothing, speech, print, radio, film, TV, Internet, etc. All these have very different ways of communicating. The image of media literacy makes sense though. We understand that literacy is understanding, analysing and effectively communicating some kind of new awareness concerning language and text, such as reading a book and then writing a paper about it.

So when we speak of media literacy, we really mean multi-media (not just books) and some kind of critical engagement of a sample drawn from the infinite pool of mass media. And here is the rub: we say media “is” quite often because we think of it as some kind of amorphous entity, huge and massive beyond our grasp. We think of it as this big, singular thing, the way that ancient, monotheistic people may have thought of God. Unfortunately, it is hard to picture the entire media complex as some gray-bearded guy on a throne who floats in the clouds and dreams up all the stuff we are exposed to in our daily environment, a key word, since commercial media is the environment we inhabit. In terms of media, what we are facing is a very complex, systemic structure that is beyond the scope of any single image that we extricate from its ceaseless flow. In a sense it’s like trying to know the river by dipping your hands into it.

Still, over the past 150 years as mass media has come into being, people have thought hard and written critically about it, and over time, models have developed in order for us to understand and analyze it. What follows is by no way complete, but it’s a sound method for deconstruction, which is, ironically, a technique that came out of literature and linguistics. The principle of deconstruction is that language is “unstable,” that is, it changes meaning in contexts and according to who reads it. When you are deconstructing media, you are the producer of meaning, you are changing the relationship between the maker (usually a corporation, but not always) and yourself. You are regaining control of the messages in a commercial environment in which we often feel powerless. The aim of deconstruction is to take the wind out of the message’s sails at it navigates your brain. Advertisers know that once you put an image in a person’s head, it can’t be taken out. But what can be altered is the relationship with that image, and how much it influences us.

Keep in mind that media construct realities. As long as you live in a corporate dream world, you are living in someone else’s future, one that doesn’t necessarily represent your aspirations or needs. Reclaim the present; take control of the reality of your consciousness. Be media savvy, be media literate!
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This deconstruction model is geared towards building an awareness of systems by asking how rather than what. Use a media sample and answer the following questions in order. What are the values you bring to the process?

Your knowledge, life experience and biases are important to note before you start the process. These things are both assets and hindrances, but self-awareness is crucial. Start with your intuitive response, becoming aware of shapes, colors, symbols, contrast, sounds, etc. Ask yourself: What is your gut reaction?

There is no right or wrong answer.
Consider the following:

- How does the context influence the media example? What outlet/venue does the media example come from? What magazine did the sample appear in?
- How is the media example paid for? They’re the real storyteller. Companies don’t pay millions of dollars for an ad without a reason. What is it?
- Why is the storyteller presenting this message? What messages and values are being expressed?
- Who is being targeted? Who is the story being told to? Who are the consumers of the message? Who are the readers of the media?

What doesn’t the advertiser want you to think about?

- How is presented lifestyle reinforcing the message? Is it glamorized? How?
- How is the story constructed? What techniques does the storyteller use? What technological tools or attention hooks are used?
- How does the story’s text differ from what it means? What is the text of the message? Is there a subtext?
- How is the story framing the information? What is missing from outside the frame? What information or counter messages are there?
Print media is constructed by any combination of image and text intended to generate an emotional reaction. When analyzing media, always consider the aesthetic(s).

What is your intuitive response?

Do a free write.

Do a free write (automatic writing exercise) to generate an unedited response to the media sample on the opposite page. This means continuously writing without moving your pen or pencil from the paper for either a set amount of time or pages. The only rule in automatic writing is to never stop the hand from moving and to not edit, delete or backtrack anything written down. Do any particular words come to mind when you look at this sample?
Consider the following:

- How would you describe it to a person who cannot see?
- What are the shapes?
- What are the colors like? Do they have a mood?
- How is it spatially? Is it crowded or airy?
- What’s the contrast between lights and darks?

What was the media producer intending?
How successful is the attempt?

It’s important to note that this is by no means a complete list – it is but a primer into the aesthetics of print advertising and media. These concepts and questions can also be applied to TV ads – however, this is much harder to do. A print ad can be studied for as long as necessary, while a TV ad (unless recorded) – well, you’ve only got about 30 seconds to “read” it.
Media employ specific techniques to construct believable stories. They hook our attention through psychological devices and technical effects. The techniques are vast and many, but some common ones are easily recognizable and are identified here. Remember, advertisers will use many techniques not listed. Add to this list as needed.

This section covers:

- Technical effects
- Emotional hooks

Products are sold using three main emotions: Fear, sex & humour. Ads appeal to our emotions through emotional transfer and are rarely dependent on intellectual analysis.
Accessories enhance the product. *What’s being associated* with the product, such as clothes, props, models?

Lighting is used to draw your eye to certain details.

Happy and attractive people are made-up and constructed to enhance the message. *What kinds of people are in the ad?*

Special effects bring inanimate things to life and make them exciting. *This is especially true with children-targeted ads.*

Consider the following: Does *every* graphic element or effect have a purpose?
Emotional Transfer is the process of generating emotions in order to transfer them to a product. For example, a Coke ad shows happy, beautiful people but tells us nothing about the product. The point is to make you feel good and to transfer that feeling to the brand or product. *This is the number one and most important process of media manipulation.*

Fear messages are directed at our insecurities, such as “no one will like you if you have dandruff” or “bald people are losers.” This is a very common technique and extra attention is required to resist these messages.

Models and actors generally have rare body types, and don’t represent average people, but idealized notions of beauty that are constantly changing.
**Emotional Hooks (Con’t).**

*Symbols* are easily recognized elements from our culture that generate powerful emotions, such as flags and crosses.

*Humour* is often used because it makes us feel good and is memorable.

*Hype* - Don’t believe it. Be skeptical of exaggerated claims, such as “America’s favourite burger.” Statements like these sound good but are meaningless and vague.

*Fitting In* is a very common technique that tries to influence us by stating that if everyone else is buying the product, so should you. This is often seen in beer commercials, which promotes a “big lie” that everyone drinks (alcoholics are the main consumers of alcohol).

*Wink-Wink:* Media consumers have become so sophisticated and skeptical, advertisers often self-reference their own techniques, even making fun of the fact that they are marketing to us. They “wink” at us to let us know that they are in on the joke.

*Cute.* Children and animals always steal the show. “Family” and “girl next door” also fit this category.

*Fetish* is typically used in car commercials. It deifies and anthropomorphizes inanimate objects in order to make them into living, vital things of desire.

*Vague Promises* like “might,” “maybe,” and “could” are red herrings that divert our attention. “Super Glue may heal cuts better than band-aids” sounds absurd, but you will often hear claims as preposterous as this and it would still be true (because it can’t be disproved).

*Testimonials* are statements by people explaining why certain products are great. Famous or plain folk, or actors can do them. This is more powerful when someone we really like or respect endorses a product (such as Tiger Woods or Michael Jordan).

*Famous People* such as Michael Jordan make products appealing and attractive through association.

*Ordinary People* are people that might be like you or me. This is common in ads that stress community or family, like Wal-Mart.

*It’s Easy.* Simple solutions are often used to convince us that a product will solve our problems, such as “bald spot hair spray will get you a date,” or “doorknob disinfectant wipes keep us healthy.”

*Larger ideological messages* are common as well, such as “cars conquer nature.”

*Macho* is generally used to appeal to males, but not exclusively. It demonstrates masculinity and male stereotypes; these are common in military and tobacco ads.

*Femininity* is another gender stereotype used in a variety of ads, from teen make-up commercials to alcohol ads.

*Repetition* is done to reiterate a sales pitch over and over again, like the phone ads that repeatedly display and announce the phone number to access their service.

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Big Lies are exaggerated promises that are impossible to deliver, such as, “This is America’s best all-weather vehicle” (also see hype). More subtle examples include “eating Sugar Corn Flakes will make you as strong as an Olympian.”

Exotic. This is the appeal of the “other”; it could be a beach location, tribal person, something strange or unknown. This is often meant to hook you through presenting something that is out of the ordinary or beyond our everyday experience.

Flattery is used to make you feel good about you as a consumer and that you are making the right choice when you chose a product. “Smart people like you always buy premium aquariums when purchasing exotic fish...”

Social outcasts generally represent a put-down or demeaning comment about a competing product or cultural group. This is not limited to ads, but is common in propaganda as well (“they don’t believe in God,” etc.).

Surrealism. Commercial media employ some of the brightest minds of the media world and often require cutting edge artists to keep their material fresh (e.g. MTV). Often, as a reflection of how unreal the fantasy world of media is, you will see juxtapositions and dream-like imagery that make no sense because the advertiser is trying to get your attention by presenting something strange and different.

The Good Old Days. Images, fashion, film effects and music depicting specific eras or subcultures are meant to appeal directly to the demographic represented in the ad (e.g. VW bus, classic rock music, sepia tone effects).

Culture. Niche marketing is more common as advertisers hone their messages for specific cultural groups. See the facing page for an example.
MEDIA ANALYSIS

A magazine is not an object, it is a structure. It is impossible to separate media from their power structure; super powerful multinational companies produce the majority of media. Media messages tend to reflect the values and ideology of their producers and distributors. Whereas art can generally be viewed on its own terms (in relation to the author/creator; however institutional frameworks do apply to the exhibition or art), commercial media should be viewed in the context of power, economics and the inherent value in the belief in technology.

Media reflects and directs. Communication is a complex relationship between producer and audience. Rarely is there a unidirectional (or syringe model) trajectory of any message. Society's values are both reflected and directed by media. This does not mean there is an equal power relationship between producers and consumers of media, but “feedback” does factor into the relationship between producer and audience.

Media are fantasies. Highly trained technicians and artists construct media. Although we tend to believe video and photography accurately represent reality, they are re-creations that involve editorial decisions. Media should never be confused with reality.
Consider the following.

**Media are a Map.** Just as art produced by ancient cultures inform us of the values and perceptions, media have a similar capacity to inform us of the belief systems of their producers. Media as maps allow us to understand the territory of values and beliefs related to the cultural, spiritual and/or economic system that created the media.

**Media are Comprised of a System of Symbols.** Symbols are signs of cultural understanding that enable us to understand media messages. Brands, logos and text convey specific messages that are interpreted according to individual belief systems, education and domestication. Brands, logos and text generally differentiate graphic design from pure visual art.

**Mass Media Put a Human Face on Abstract Legal Entities.** Media translate abstract legal entities, such as corporations, into symbolic worlds. We begin to identify models, actors and spokespeople as real people within the symbolic world of media-generated realities. *Notice how the company on the facing page refers to itself as “we”.*

**The Symbolic World of Advertising is the Dream Life of Corporations.** Rarely do commercials represent the aspirations and desires of real people, but rather project desires and ideals of body types, attitudes and beliefs upon artificial entities (such as corporations represented by brands).

**Products Have Magical Powers That Influence Human Emotions.** Brands and products become the most highly prized parts of media messages. They have the power to grant love, happiness and esteem. Their lack is nearly always portrayed as a cause of misery. Human relations are almost always secondary to products.
Afterword.

It cannot be overemphasized enough that media not be demonized. First of all, you want to constructively engage media, and it’s always valuable to consider positive uses of media, such as documentary, public service announcements, or cultural jamming. Remember that media are just forms of communication. Secondly, most people are so immersed into mediated reality, they can take attacks on media personally. Do not take lightly that you are literally breaking down the generally accepted reality. With that said, in general you have more sophistication regarding media than given credit for. Intuitively we get deconstruction, but usually we have not seen it articulated through specific techniques (this is evidenced by the prevalence of commercials that actually use self-referential deconstruction as a gimmick). Given the overwhelming presence of media in our lives (we are exposed to upwards of 3,000 ads a day), re-contextualization, rethinking and reconstructing media should be one of the primary activities of self-empowerment.

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