

CHAPTER 1



The Impossible Dream of Representational Correctness

What academic scholars have in common, regardless of their disciplinary, theoretical, or methodological pieties, is that they advance argumentative claims and propositions. This book is motivated by a conviction that in the practice of popular media criticism certain kinds of claims, assumptions, and patterns of inference have an unwarranted level of acceptance.

The idea that criticism functions as a form of argument is not new. In 1974, communication scholar Wayne Brockriede urged his discipline to view criticism as argument. While not all criticism must be thought of in such terms, Brockriede contends that criticism advancing *analysis* and *evaluation* of communicative phenomena ought to “function as an argument” (1974, p. 165). To the extent critics wish to encourage their readers to view phenomena in a particular way, critics’ discourse functions argumentatively if it involves “an inferential leap from existing beliefs to the adoption of a new belief” and “a perceived rationale to justify that leap” (p. 166). Michael C. McGee echoed Brockriede’s point some years later when he noted, “Professional criticism functions to persuade readers to make the same judgments of salience, attitude, belief, and action the critic made” (1990, p. 283). The sorts of judgments McGee identifies—salience, attitudes, belief, and action—will all be addressed in this book in the context of the criticism of popular media.

For both ethical and epistemological reasons, criticism as argument entails “a willingness to risk a confrontation of that claim with one’s peers” (Brockriede, 1974, p. 166). Ethically, “confrontation” means that critics share their rationale so that criticism remains in the realm of persuasion or invitation rather than coercion; it also means that critics remain open to the

possibility that their claims will be modified or even abandoned by readers. Epistemologically, “confrontation” means that critics offer evidence and explain their rationale so the “reader-confronter” has the opportunity to evaluate the soundness of an arguer’s claim: “By inviting confrontation, the critic-arguer tries to establish some degree of intersubjective reliability in his [or her] judgment and in his [or her] reasons for the judgment” (p. 167).

Accordingly, this book offers a scholarly confrontation with particular kinds of claims, assumptions, and patterns of inference employed in the criticism of popular culture. My initial argument in this book is that we need to recognize the fallacy of “Representational Correctness” and move beyond it in our analysis. I explain in some detail what I mean by Representational Correctness later, but an example may be helpful at the outset. When the movie version of *The Da Vinci Code* was released in May 2006, it was criticized for its portrayal of Jesus, the Roman Catholic Church, and the *Opus Dei* organization. More of interest for this book is the fact that the National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation (NOAH) “expressed unhappiness” with the fact that the film’s assassin is an albino: They claim that *The Da Vinci Code* is the 68th movie since 1960 to feature an evil albino. According to Mike McGowan, NOAH president, “Over the years the stereotyping and misinformation foisted on the albinism community by filmmakers who don’t take the time to learn the facts about albinism does real harm to real people” (NOAH, 2005). Concerns such as those voiced by McGowan are not entirely misplaced. Negative portrayals of a group of people in film and television, especially a group unfamiliar to many, certainly can influence how that group is perceived by the population as a whole, and such perceptions can lead to prejudicial attitudes. The core of NOAH’s critique is twofold: The representation of albinos in film is *incorrect* (most albinos are not evil assassins) and *harmful* to the extent that such representations encourage prejudice.

The example of the criticism of the albino assassin in *The Da Vinci Code* highlights two key themes that are explored in this book. First, as sensible as the criticism may appear, it implies that there is such a thing as a “correct” representation of albinos to which filmmakers ought to aspire. The dream of a perfectly Correct Representation is unreachable. Now, admittedly, few critics use the specific words “correct,” “perfect,” or even “accurate” to describe a representation. Yet, as we shall see, such notions are implicit and logically entailed in *many* critiques of representation. For example, typically whenever one uses the term *stereotype* to describe a representation, there is an implicit charge that the representation is somehow an incorrect and inaccurate way to portray a category of people.

Second, the question of whether such representations are, in fact, influential and harmful is an empirical one. One cannot rely solely on a critic’s interpretation of what a film, song, or television show may “mean”

to its various audiences. I honestly do not know if filmic representations of albinos actually influence audience members' perceptions about albinos or not. I have known only one albino in my life, and he was a funny, kind, high school band teacher. If I were asked, I would certainly espouse no prejudicial attitudes about albinos, and I would hypothesize that films may feature albinos in certain roles primarily because they are visually striking (*Matrix II* comes to mind). But I honestly have no clue as to whether most moviegoers would feel as I do, or if in fact such filmic representations have shaped the perceptions of, and attitudes toward, albinos in our society.

What I have said so far about representations of albinos can be applied to any other social group that may command the attention of critics of popular media. In this chapter, I describe what I mean by Representational Correctness and make the case that critics who have pursued such a dream have created a double bind that no individual representation could ever hope to overcome.

Unpacking Representational Correctness

Representational Correctness refers to a set of beliefs that often implicitly underlies critiques of “popular media texts.”¹ As Barry Brummett notes, for many critics representations “sermonize” about how to make sense of our world and thus warrant critical inspection (1991, p. xvi). The fundamental philosophy of Representational Correctness can be traced back to Plato’s belief that if art imitates life, then that imitation can and ought to be done *correctly*. This can be thought of as *orthê mimêsis*, or “correct imitation.” Plato’s objection to the popular entertainment of his time, poetry, was that it “disguises and distorts reality and at the same time distracts us and plays tricks with us by appealing to the shallowest of our sensibilities” (Havelock, 1963, p. 26). In *The Republic*, poetry is censored and poets exiled because such misrepresentations do not serve to educate the masses properly—especially the young—and can be “injurious” to philosophically untrained minds (Cornford, 1941, p. 324). Obviously the idea that representations proffered in “popular media” are worthy of critical inspection, and possible censure, has a long history.

For those who keep up with contemporary popular media criticism, the spirit of Representational Correctness pops up almost constantly, both from the Right and the Left. Consider the following examples, which range from the silly to the very serious:

1. Peter Jackson’s blockbuster remake of *King Kong* is described as presenting “an atrocious and offensive depiction of Islanders as a ‘savage’ population incapable of hygiene with their eyes rolled back in their heads” (Zephoria, 2006).

2. Keanu Reeves's character in the film *Hardball* is described as a stereotypical "great White savior" who rescues an all-Black inner-city baseball team (GRIID, 2003).

3. The animated television series *Jake Long: American Dragon*, which features a teenage Chinese American who transforms into a dragon, is described as presenting "confusing racial stereotyping" (Herman, 2006).

4. The animated action film *The Incredibles* is interpreted as reinforcing "inflated family stereotypes" (Klawans, 2004).

5. U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings objects to an episode of PBS's animated children's series *Postcards from Buster* for exposing children to a family headed by two lesbians: "Many parents would not want their young children exposed to the life-styles portrayed in this episode" (de Moraes, 2005).

6. On a fan Web site, one viewer complains that Disney's animated series *Kim Possible* is "sexist" due to the fact that all of the male characters are "nerds or jerks" (Doug135711, 2006).

7. The movie version of Chris Van Allsburg's book *The Polar Express* is criticized by some Christian media critics as turning Christmas into Clausmas, "beckoning us to worship the jolly old elf as the heart and soul of this all-important holiday. And that's something that Christians should be very wary of indeed" (Robertson, 2004).

8. Multiple critics note that representations of Arabs in U.S. film, beginning long before 9/11, constitute "slandorous stereotypes" that distort what Arab men, women, and children "are really like" (Shaheen, 2001, p. 1).

9. Nearly every mainstream film ever made about Native Americans in the United States has been criticized for perpetuating overly simplistic and stereotypical representations (Aleiss, 2005; Hilger, 1986; Kilpatrick, 1999).

10. Nearly all Disney movies are criticized for their stereotypical portrayals of women and minorities (Ayes, 2003; Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995; Brockus, 2004; Budd & Kirsch, 2005; Giroux, 1999; Lacroix, 2004).

11. An irate reader of *The Minneapolis Star-Tribune* complained that the headline of an article, "Pedestrian killed by SUV that fled people," was prejudicial. "You are making a conscious effort to turn opinions against SUVs and the mostly wealthier, suburban, and, yes, mostly Republicans who would own them" (Gelfand, 2002).

12. Apart from criticism of what representations are found in popular television programs or films, critics also have noted the *lack* of representation of most minority groups in such media. Indeed, the only social groups that are not underrepresented are White and Black men.

If these examples lead one to conclude that many people are unhappy with the way the popular media represents social groups, one is right. A study by Stuart Fischhoff and colleagues (1999) found that about half of over 1,200 respondents surveyed were offended by representations of their respective social groups; for example, Asians were offended by humor mocking their English skills, their invisibility in film, and the casting of actors from one Asian culture to portray Asians from another.²

The point I wish to make with such examples goes beyond the conventional wisdom that you cannot please everyone, true as that might be. It is a testament to human creativity that we can generate evaluative criteria that no human production could ever meet. What I want to argue here is that there are specific criteria that are less useful than they may appear, and these criteria can be summarized usefully under the umbrella of what I am calling "Representational Correctness." What I have in mind is a *mélange* of ideas that can be found in media criticism, implicitly or explicitly, ideas that advance norms of representational accuracy, purity, and innocence. *Accuracy* implies that a representation should be authentic and true to the social group depicted to avoid the distortion of stereotype. *Purity* implies that a representation should be pure in its liberatory possibilities and avoid ambivalence or ideological contradiction. *Innocence* implies that a representation is devoid of offense or insult to the group depicted. I shall provide examples of these norms throughout the book; for the moment, I would simply assert that a good portion of popular media analysis is guided by the idea that *if* we can attain the goal of Representational Correctness *then* oppressed groups will be empowered or at least encouraged, and mainstream consumers and users of popular media will be motivated toward a more tolerant, open, and just society.

As I noted earlier, these norms function mostly at an unstated, implicit level. If asked, most critics of popular media would not openly embrace such notions as representational accuracy, purity, and innocence. For example, they might claim that they are concerned with the cultural and political work of the text and, following Stuart Hall (1992, 1997), distance themselves from an explicit commitment to Representational Correctness. Nonetheless, throughout this book I will provide numerous examples of criticism of popular media in which I believe the norms of Representational Correctness are at work. Readers will have to decide for themselves whether my examples are fair interpretations of the critical projects I engage. I admit at the outset that in the process of engaging a large body of scholarship, a certain amount of oversimplification is inevitable. I believe, however, that if one steps back to survey the considerable scholarship committed to the criticism of popular media to identify common themes, the norms of Representational Correctness are quickly apparent.

My analysis focuses primarily on what I describe as paid or professional criticism, that is, criticism by academic scholars and media critics whose labor *as* critics is indirectly or directly rewarded financially. The label “professional” links such criticism to what John Frow usefully calls the “knowledge class” (1995), but I do not wish to imply that unpaid criticism, such as might be found in a letter to the editor, fan group communication, or casual conversation, should be valued less because it is “popular” or “unprofessional.” I argue later that the need to provide criticism that is “expert” and therefore has added value over unpaid criticism can motivate particular ways of interpreting and critically analyzing popular culture artifacts that are sometimes brilliant but sometimes so out of touch with unpaid audiences as to miss the important work popular media are accomplishing in our culture.

Three major assumptions that inform Representational Correctness (hereafter RC) are problematic. The first is that RC assumes that popular culture texts have a primary, or at least a preferred or dominant, meaning that a discerning critic can *independently* determine and analyze. The vocabulary of “dominant,” “negotiated,” or “oppositional” readings comes from Stuart Hall’s influential essay, “Encoding/Decoding” (1980). The way Hall’s terminology is typically deployed by critics follows the logic that *if* the critic understands the culture’s dominant ideology, *then* it is a matter of decoding how that dominant ideology manifests itself in a particular text. By definition, a dominant ideology is that which holds sway over most popular media consumers, so if the critic decodes the text appropriately, then she or he can be reasonably confident of how most audience members understand the meaning of the text. Now Hall was quite clear that his categories “need to be empirically tested and refined” (1980, p. 136), and most accounts of “negotiated” or “oppositional” readings are, indeed, informed by audience research (see chapter 2). Too often, however, critics assume they can ascertain the dominant or preferred reading all on their own. I am quite willing to grant that most (though not all) texts have a “dominant” reading *if* it is stipulated that a dominant reading is understood simply as that which is preferred by a majority of readers at a particular point in time—that is, if we define “dominant” in terms of a dominant audience reception and not by particular qualities that inhere in the text.

Later I argue that “textual analysis” of popular culture media is, in a sense, a misleading label: All analysis is a kind of audience reception analysis—what is called “textual analysis” might be more productively thought of as a very specialized kind of audience reception. Meanwhile, the point here is nothing new: *All* movies, television shows, songs, books, and so on are open to multiple interpretations; indeed, sometimes audiences find meanings in popular culture texts that patently contradict what the creators of those texts intended or anticipated. The “text” is silent and meaningless

until experienced. The dominant reading is the interpretation that is empirically dominant for a specified audience at a particular point in time.

The second assumption that typically informs criticism guided by a sense of RC is an overly simplistic model of media effects; namely, that sociopolitically good texts cause good effects, and that sociopolitically bad texts cause bad effects. At times, what informs popular media criticism is a version of the old hypodermic needle or “magic bullet” theory of media effects. As the metaphors imply, the theory suggests a direct, causal influence between the transmission or injection of a mass-mediated message and audience reactions. The theory dates back to the 1920s and 1930s when there were concerns about the influence of the era’s new media, radio and film. The Payne Fund Studies consisted of an ambitious set of thirteen projects that sought to examine the effects of film in particular. Though there were some serious methodological limitations, the findings of various effects, primarily on children, created a great deal of public concern about the potential negative effects of popular film (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Of course, the most famous example of the direct effect of mass media in this era was the panic caused among some listeners to the 1938 radio broadcast by Orson Welles and the Mercury Theater group of H. G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds*—a phenomenon that received enormous media coverage and was subsequently the subject of a 1940 academic book *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (Cantril, 1982). These early studies provided scholarly credibility to the commonsense intuition that popular media *matters* and can effect those who watch or listen.

Among most mass communication researchers, the simplistic direct effects model was discredited by Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues’ influential study of media exposure and voting choices in the 1940 elections (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) and subsequent scholarship advocating what has come to be called a “limited effects” model. However, the direct effects model has persisted in the criticism of popular culture, both in and out of academia.

Actually, for as long as human history has been recorded, critics have always worried about the potentially negative effects of popular culture—from Plato’s critique of poets to the latest panic over violent video games. It is noteworthy that the forms of arguments made have not changed very much. The history of critical responses to popular comic books offers a nice illustration. There have been critics of the corrupting influences of comic books on young readers since 1940 (Beaty, 2005; Heer & Worcester, 2004; Nyberg, 1998), but three are particularly noteworthy for my purposes.

1. Over 50 years ago, Gershon Legman railed against the prevalence of violence in comic books in terms remarkably similar to later

critiques of television violence. He claims that by the time a child is 10 or 11 years old, she or he would have “absorbed” a minimum of 18,000 beatings, shootings, stranglings, and other acts of violence: “With repetition like that, you can teach a child anything” (1949, p. 31). “The effect,” Legman claims, “has been to raise an entire generation” that has felt “all the sensations and emotions of committing murder, except pulling the trigger” (p. 32). In addition to encouraging the acceptance of violence, Legman argues that Superman represents a “Nazi-Nietzschean *Übermensch*” whose method of administering justice is indistinguishable “from that of Hitler and the Ku Klux Klan” (p. 40). Describing Wonder Woman in part as “Blondie with a bull-whip,” Legman claims she is clearly a lesbian (p. 48).

2. A more influential book on the dangerous effect of comic books was Fredric Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). Among other claims, Wertham argued that young readers are influenced by the “psychologically unmistakable” homosexual subtext of Wonder Woman and the “homosexual and anti-feminine” atmosphere of Batman and Robin comics (pp. 189–93). Wertham also argued for a causal connection between comic book consumption and juvenile delinquency; his research (primarily anecdotal) helped fuel congressional hearings on the hazards of comic books that led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority (Beaty, 2005; Nyberg, 1998).

3. Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart illustrate a somewhat different critique in their book *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (1975). While earlier comic book critics tend to draw mostly from Freud, Dorfman and Mattelart draw mostly from Marx to make the case that Disney comics create a politically impoverished, colonizing narrative that contributes to the oppression of U.S. minorities and citizens of economically dependent countries: “Reading Disney is like having one’s own exploited condition rammed with honey down one’s throat” (p. 98). Dorfman and Mattelart’s critique is similar to Legman’s and Wertham’s in the sense that they all “read” comic books as contributing to attitudes and behaviors the critics find problematic.

The argument of these comic book critics relies on a two-step process that we will see again and again in popular culture analysis: *First that a given text “means” such and such (whether the meaning is obvious or subtle, conscious or unconscious, explicit or subtextual) and second that such meanings influence those who experience them.* Even when a critic maintains that an audience is oblivious to the hegemonic or unconscious meaning(s) of the text, there is typically (though not always) an assumption that there is an influence on beliefs, feelings, attitudes, or behaviors. Otherwise, why bother with engaging texts?

Effects models have become more sophisticated, of course, though this fact does not mean that critics of popular media have necessarily kept up. A less direct model, again typically unacknowledged but influential among popular media critics, is a version of George Gerbner's cultivation theory (for a summary, see Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). Gerbner argues that television is highly repetitive—the more one watches, the more the messages of television “cultivate” a way of (mis)understanding the world. For example, messages on television about violence over years of exposure will socialize television viewers into beliefs about violence that are not true. Television viewers who watch *a lot* of television (more than 4 hours a day) think the world is more dangerous than it is, statistically speaking. Sometimes this effect is called the “drip, drip” effect, as it is assumed that changes in attitudes are the cumulative result of long-term exposure, while at other times it is argued that viewers can be “drenched” by a sudden flood of mass-mediated messages (Greenberg, 1988; Reep & Dambrot, 1989). Some popular culture critics contend that *one* movie or *one* television show will influence viewers to think about some social group in one way or another. If only it were that easy!

To be sure, there are plenty of examples of where popular media had fairly obvious and direct results. Two of my favorites are the fact that applications for library cards briefly skyrocketed after “the Fonz” on *Happy Days* got one (Sparks, 2006, p. 149), and the fact that sales of wine made with pinot noir grapes soared briefly as an apparent result of the praise the wine received in the movie *Sideways* (Verrinder, 2005). Plenty of negative examples of “copycat behavior” can be found as well, including viewers imitating bomb threats, felony crime techniques, professional wrestling moves, and dangerous stunts seen on television. In some cases these imitations had fatal consequences (Sparks, 2006, pp. 81–83). Indeed, the link between children viewing television violence and subsequent violent behavior is well documented.³

While there is little doubt that viewers sometimes imitate *behavior* they see in popular media, proving that such media can alter *attitudes* and *beliefs* has not been easy. The most ambitious research in this area has been carried out by scholars informed by cultivation theory studying the effects of television. James Shanahan and Michael Morgan provide a comprehensive overview of this research in their book *Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research* (1999). Using the statistical techniques of meta-analysis, they summarize nearly 6,000 separate findings from 97 study samples, involving tens of thousands of viewers, all published since 1976. Studying attitudes concerning everything from aging, minority groups, abortion, the legalization of marijuana, interracial marriage, crime rates, and sex roles to romance, they found an average correlation of .10, which means that about 1% of the total variance has been explained by television viewing

(Shanahan & Morgan, 1999, p. 115). To put these findings in more practical terms, we could say that 1% of people's beliefs is the result of television viewing; or, put differently, if a hypothetical score of 100% indicates that the media will *wholly* determine a typical person's attitudes on a given subject, then the research indicates that the average score for all individuals is 1%. This is a conservative estimate, of course, and depending on the subject matter of the effected beliefs, the ability of television to alter 1% is not trivial. Nonetheless, the fact that after 30 years of studies researchers can prove only a small overall effect should caution popular culture critics against making dramatic claims about the effects of particular films and programs. Normally, when it comes to an individual film, song, or television show, critics should operate with a Presumption of Negligible Effects absent evidence to the contrary.

Chapter 2 of this book argues that if critics wish to advance what I call "audience conjectures" about the *meaning* or *effects* of pop culture, then their claims would be far more persuasive if they would provide evidence drawn from audience research. I will not anticipate the critique further, except insofar as it informs the third problematic assumption of RC.

The third assumption is that of *simultaneity*; namely, that when a text is judged by the demands of representational accuracy, purity, and innocence, it must meet these requirements *simultaneously*. All three demands are taken as necessary conditions, and none is independently sufficient, to reach a state of RC.

My argument concerning the assumption of simultaneity is that *it is an impossible standard to meet*. The reason it is impossible to meet has to do with the relationships among the central beliefs that reinforce prejudice. In the next section I describe these beliefs as the "triad of prejudice." I then explain how their interrelationships complicate the possibility of simultaneity.

The Triad of Prejudice

Psychologist Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1993) describes three "gender lenses" embedded in our culture that "provide the foundation for a theory of how biology, culture, and individual psyche all interact in historical context to systematically reproduce male power" (p. viii). These three lenses are the widely recognized concepts known as "gender polarization," "androcentrism," and "biological essentialism." Bem provides a concise summary:

Throughout the history of Western culture, three beliefs about women and men have prevailed: that they have fundamentally different psychologically and sexual natures, that men are inherently the dominant or superior sex, and that both male-female difference and male dominance are natural. (1993, p. 1)

Academic scholars have many ways of describing what Bem is after, but whether we describe the lenses of gender as a “terministic screen” or a dominant set of “schemas,” these three ideas also can be described simply as “beliefs” that are widely shared in U.S. culture and that perpetuate sexist attitudes, behaviors, and policies. When children are socialized, “the individual gradually internalizes the cultural lenses and thereby becomes motivated to construct an identity that is consistent with them” (Bem, 1993, p. 3). Bem describes this process in terms that some might describe as interpellation: “The discourses and social institutions in which [these beliefs] are embedded automatically channel females and males into different and unequal life situations” (1993, p. 3).

A classic illustration of gender polarization, androcentrism, and biological essentialism can be found in the popular works of John Gray. As nicely documented in a doctoral dissertation by E. S. Weber (2002), *Gray’s Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* theme manages to advance all three key beliefs of sexism. Men and women are so different that it is as if they were from different planets, and their differences are caused by their distinctly different psychobiology. Gray’s androcentrism plays itself out in two ways. First, the qualities he associates with masculinity tend to coincide with preferred societal values, such as power, competence, career success, problem solving, and public participation. Second, women are not only defined in opposition to men (and thus exhibit qualities less culturally valuable than men), but they are defined primarily by the support roles they play for men—as mothers for men’s children and caretakers of men’s homes. If one has any doubt of the androcentrism of Gray’s views, then consider his advice that some women need to go on the equivalent of an “orgasmic diet” if their sexual needs are not in sync with those of their men (Potts, 1998, p. 170).

Despite the progress of the women’s movement, elements of this triad of prejudice remain pervasive. According to a research brief by Joe Kelly and Stacy L. Smith, *Where the Girls Aren’t: Gender Disparity Saturates G-Rated Films*, there is a huge imbalance in the number of male and female characters in movies targeted at children and families (Kelly & Smith, 2006). In the 101 top-grossing G-rated films from 1990 through 2004, 75% of the characters were male, 72% of speaking characters were male, 83% of all narrators were male, and 83% of characters in “crowd scenes” were male. Even using a conservative requirement of a ratio of 3 males for every 2 females, only 7% of all films studied were “balanced” by gender, and 46% had an imbalance of at least a 3 to 1 ratio. Of course, G-rated films are not the only source of mass-mediated messages that kids receive, since most also watch television. Unfortunately, females are seen less frequently than males on television as well (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004).

Does such an imbalance really matter? A meta-analysis of research on television programming and sex stereotyping by Herrett-Skjellum and Allen (1996) synthesized scholarship both on the content of television programming and its effects. What message is being provided? “All content analyses illustrate the consistent finding that men are more often on TV, in higher-status roles as characters, and are represented as having greater power than women” (p. 171). Based on such analysis, “we may conclude that the content of the media incorporates a large number of sexual stereotypes” (p. 173). More recently, Patrice A. Opliger (2007) conducted a meta-analysis involving 33 studies and over 12,000 participants. Twenty-five of the studies she analyzed involved children. She concluded that “as exposure to gender stereotyping increases, sex-typed behavior and sex-role stereotyped attitudes increase” (p. 210). Herrett-Skjellum and Allen (1996) report that “heavy” television viewers are twice as likely as other viewers to profess sex-specific stereotypical attitudes (p. 178).

In other words, the content of film and television programming consistently sends the message that it is a man’s world—androcentrism in a nutshell. The available audience research supports the conclusion that the more children consume of such programming, the more likely they are to believe the message. Moreover, Jacob Orlofsky, Ralph Cohen, and Mark Ramsden (1985) found that people with more traditional (stereotyped) sex role attitudes are more likely to have reported sex-typed interests and behaviors. That is, the more people profess to talk the talk of traditional sex roles, the more likely they are to walk the walk.

To understand how mass media advances sexism via androcentrism, gender polarization, and biological essentialism, we need to specify exactly what we are talking about when we say that “stereotypical” beliefs about women are advanced. There are many definitions of “stereotype,” and later I want to question whether the term is still useful for media criticism, but for the moment, we can stipulate that stereotypes are *pejorative overgeneralizations*. When we think about a specific group of people in stereotypical fashion, we tend to categorize *all* members of that group as having the same attributes. By “attribute” I mean any quality or characteristic that can be grammatically predicated about a group (Xs are Y), whether such attributes are behavioral (things people do), ethical (good or bad), personality traits, or physical characteristics. In the albino example mentioned earlier, the concern expressed is that representing albinos as assassins in movies advances a particular set of negative category attributes; namely, that albinos are evil and murderous (Xs are Y_1 and Y_2). If audience members’ only beliefs about albinos are those beliefs learned from feature films, then cultivation theory suggests that their understanding of the category of albinos will be limited, distorted, and negative. As psychologists Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams (1988) put it, “Catego-

rization can thus be considered to be the process underlying and responsible for stereotyping” (p. 73).

Stereotypical portrayals of women are those that represent the category of women only or primarily with traditionally “feminine” attributes. What are those attributes? Arguably, what people count as masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral attributes is constantly evolving—a point to which I return later. We can begin, however, by noting some of the following attributes identified in the well-known Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974):

| <i>Masculine</i> | <i>Feminine</i> |
|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Independent | Sensitive to needs of others |
| Assertive | Yielding |
| Forceful | Sympathetic |
| Leadership abilities | Childlike |
| Dominant | Gullible |
| Aggressive | Gentle |
| Analytical | Affectionate |
| Competitive | Compassionate |
| Ambitious | Shy |
| Individualistic | Tender |

Bem’s Sex Role Inventory was originally developed in the early 1970s. More recently, James Mahalik and his colleagues (2003, 2005) have created the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory and the Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory to update our understanding of what sorts of attributes are expected and treated as normative for men and women. Their lists are worth noting as well:

Masculine Norms Inventory

| | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Winning | Controls emotions | Risk taker |
| Accepts violence | Playboy | Dominance |
| Power over women | Self-reliant | Work is primary |
| Disdain for homosexuality | Pursues status | |

Feminine Norms Inventory

| | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| Nice in relationships | Values thinness | Modest |
| Cares for children | Domestic | Values romance |
| Values sexual fidelity | Interested in appearance | |

Several points are worth noting about the gender attributes identified by Bem and later by Mahalik and his colleagues. First, the attributes

are largely polar opposites. Masculine men are seen as assertive, feminine women as yielding. Men are analytical, women are compassionate. Manly men are playboys, women value sexual fidelity. Men pursue status, women are modest. This sort of contrast is exactly what Bem is getting at with her concept of gender polarization. Second, in general, the masculine category attributes are more highly valued in contemporary U.S. society than the feminine category attributes. Whether hiring a corporate executive or electing a president, the attributes associated with masculinity are more often privileged than those associated with femininity. This, of course, is what Bem and others mean by androcentrism—Man is the Measure of desirable attributes. Not entirely, of course. It would be oversimplistic to say that none of the attributes associated with femininity is valued. The point is that many of the most important and powerful economic, political, and social roles in our society are coded masculine; that is, the attributes associated with such roles draw more heavily from traditionally masculine attributes than feminine or gender-neutral attributes (Eagley & Karau, 2002). Lastly, persistent stereotypical representations perpetuate the belief that such attributes are “natural,” “normal,” or “innate.” Essentialism implies that being masculine is in the nature of being a man, and that women are naturally feminine.

In short, mass-media representations are important because they do “category work.” That is, they play an important socialization role in teaching us about the categories of men and women, masculinity and femininity. As I shall argue later, such category work also creates an opportunity for popular culture media to promote social change.

The Triad of Prejudice: Not Just about Gender

I suggest that what Bem calls the “lenses of gender” can be thought of usefully as a triad of beliefs that informs the discriminatory attitudes, behaviors, and policies involving other social groups. I shall consider only race and sexual orientation here, but an analogous argument could be made with other social categories as well. Bem’s categories can be described as beliefs about identity, norms, and differences:

| <i>Type of Prejudice</i> | <i>Identity Beliefs</i> | <i>Normative Beliefs</i> | <i>Difference Beliefs</i> |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Sexism | Biological essentialism | Androcentrism | Gender polarization |
| Racism | Biological essentialism | Whiteness | Racial polarization |
| Heterosexism | Behavioral essentialism | Heteronormativity | Sexual polarization |

Essentialism informs beliefs about identity—that is, the belief that a certain group is what it is because it is in its nature. Sexism is rooted in the belief that women are feminine because it is their biological or

genetic nature to *be* so. Because the attributes associated with masculinity have a privileged status, androcentrism becomes the norm by which attributes are measured. And because masculine and feminine attributes are assumed to be rooted in *essential* differences, the genders are treated not only as different but as polar opposites (hence the habit of referring to “the opposite sex”). The same sort of logic can be found at work in prejudicial beliefs about race and sexual orientation.

Most racists believe that race is biologically rooted (Goldberg, 1993), and that distinct races have distinct “natures.” As Hall puts it, “Stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” (1997, p. 257). Not all racists in the world are White, of course, but in the United States *Whiteness* functions in a parallel normative fashion to *androcentrism* (hooks, 1992; West, 1993). That is, just as “Man” is the measure of all things “normal,” so is Whiteness. “At the level of representation,” Richard Dyer notes, “whites are not of a certain race, they’re just the human race” (1997, p. 3). Whiteness often functions as an “unmarked category against which difference is constructed,” but because it has been so deeply normalized, “whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (Lipsitz, 1998, p. 1).

Racial polarization functions in a manner similar to gender polarization. Just as masculine is typically defined culturally by antithesis as *not* feminine, “Whiteness” is typically defined culturally as *not* of color (Lipsitz, 1998; Winant, 1998). Lest we forget, at various times in U.S. history *any* detectable amount of African heritage could be deemed sufficient to classify someone for the purposes of segregation laws as “non-White.”

Heterosexism is a bit different from racism. For heterosexists, homosexuality is an immoral lifestyle choice and/or an unnatural perversion. For some heterosexists, it does not matter if one’s sexual preferences are learned or innate. For this reason I have chosen to characterize the essentialism of heterosexism as behavioral rather than biological, for in U.S. culture it is *what one does with whom* in one’s sexual behavior that defines whether one is straight or gay.

Heteronormativity functions in the same way Whiteness and androcentrism do; that is, “straight” is normal and natural, everything else is perverse. Theorists have argued that such naturalization and normalization is so powerful that it becomes a tacit component of our common sense, thus the psychological and cultural work that normative notions of identity perform is rendered invisible and unnoticed. As Dyer notes, “Heterosexuality as a social reality seems to be invisible to those who benefit from it. In part, this is because of the remorseless construction of heterosexuality as normal” (2002, p. 119). Robert Westerfelhaus and Celeste Lacroix add that “the invisibility of heterosexual power and privilege to

those who possess and benefit from such is strikingly similar to the invisibility of the power and privilege associated with whiteness as experienced from a 'white' perspective" (2006, p. 428).

Sexual polarization is closely related to heteronormativity. Though dating the invention of the category of "the homosexual" is a matter of some debate, most historians agree that it is a relatively recent construct, even if homosexual activity is as old as humanity. To the extent that one classifies individuals by linking sexual behavior to personality type, one assumes a dichotomy between being straight and not straight. You cannot be both. Bisexuals and transgender individuals are thus typically categorized as not straight.

It is important to recognize that all categories are informed by the very basic schemas of similarity and difference. Stereotypical categories tend to emphasize *difference*, that is, the qualities we use to define a stereotyped group are ones that are seen as different and "other" (Hall, 1997, pp. 223–77). If we stereotype women as being especially effective caregivers or as physically weak, then we do so because those qualities are in greater or lesser abundance than we consider "normal." Stereotypes thereby presuppose a falsely universalized norm (such as androcentrism), but as noted earlier, they also reinforce essentialism and polarization. The relationships among stereotypes and the beliefs informing the triad of prejudice will become important later when we think about how to combat stereotypes through the vehicle of representation.

The good news is that if one can undercut essentialism, then one can simultaneously undercut polarization. For example, if one shows women engaging in activities that are supposedly not in their "nature" to do, then one can both undercut the idea that biology is destiny *and* the idea that men and women, masculinity and femininity, can be defined only in opposition. Indeed, studies have found that young viewers exposed to counterstereotypical sex role portrayals are more likely to change their beliefs about available career choices than those who are not (Miller & Reeves, 1976). Experiments by David M. Marx and Jasmin S. Roman (2002) and Rusty B. McIntyre and colleagues (2003, 2005) found that women exposed to accounts of several successful role models in mathematics immediately scored better on a mathematics exam than women who were not exposed to such counterstereotypical models. Such evidence suggests why representations in popular culture of women athletes, attorneys, doctors, reporters, writers, politicians, scientists, and explorers are a necessary (though clearly not sufficient) step toward challenging the triad of prejudice. Of course, such representations must be *positive* representations. It would merely reinforce sexist beliefs if the only women we saw in such roles were offensive, evil, or incompetent.

Two final introductory comments about this schematization are appropriate before we put it to work. First, the three “isms” identified here work (all too well) together in U.S. culture. The “man” who is the “measure of all things” is manly, white, and straight.

Second, such a schematization obviously oversimplifies the varieties of discriminatory beliefs, attitudes, and practices that permeate U.S. culture. In the space of one book, I cannot begin to catalog all of the forms of prejudice that are related to gender, race, and sexuality, let alone all of the other forms of prejudice at work in society. But I hope that in what follows the usefulness of the triad will become evident.

The Challenge of Simultaneity

Here is the rub. You might think that if John Gray can advance all three key beliefs of sexism at once, then one ought to be able to critique all three at once as well. To be sure, we can do so in analytical prose, but it is much more difficult to do so through popular media representations. Failure to recognize this difficulty can lead critics to impose unrealistic expectations on popular media when criticizing representations or declaring the presence of stereotypes.

To illustrate the point that RC is impossible, I start with a discussion of Bonnie J. Dow’s book *Prime-time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement since 1970* (1996). Dow’s book examines a series of mainstream television shows featuring positive portrayals of women in leading roles, including *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *One Day at a Time*, *Designing Women*, *Murphy Brown*, and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. Dow’s goal is to understand how these shows negotiated issues of feminism that were contemporary with their initial airing. These shows are examined because, for Dow, they offer a vision of the meanings and implications of feminism in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. They have “done important cultural work in representing feminism for the American public” (1996, p. xv).

Dow’s modus operandi is characteristic of a good deal of scholarly popular media criticism; namely, her readings describe the popular reception of the shows, she gives a nod toward the progress the show has made in representing women, and she then argues that the representation is not as liberatory as one might think. Typically the final verdict offered by Dow is that a show ends up reinforcing patriarchy in some way or, at best, it offers viewers a representation that is contained by dominant beliefs about gender and thus “ambivalent” (that is, impure).

The Mary Tyler Moore Show, for example, was contained by dominant norms of gender because Mary’s character is too feminized and reinforces the stereotypical assumption that women are caretakers. She does not

break free from stereotypes enough to be an ideologically “pure” representation. Mary is “domesticated”: “Within her family of coworkers, Mary functions in the recognizable roles of idealized mother, wife, and daughter” (1996, p. 40). How? “Mary alternately nurtures, mediates, facilitates, and submits” (ibid.). In short, she is too “fem,” and that reinforces the triad of prejudice, and in particular it reinforces biological essentialism and thus gender polarization.

The problem with *Murphy Brown*, in contrast, is that she is too “butch”: Dow quotes critic Pyllis Japp’s comment that Murphy is “a male persona in a female body” (1996, p. 140). She describes her manner of dress as severe and contrasts it with Corky’s ultrafeminine appearance. Murphy’s physical presence defines her character as “aggressive,” “strong,” and “forceful” (pp. 140–41), and her communication style is aggressive and coded masculine: “She is supremely confident about her own opinions, and she expresses them easily, often with little regard for others’ feelings” (p. 141). Dow argues that Murphy does not lose her masculine-professional edge after becoming a mother, since post-baby episodes “retain the earlier comedic dynamic of deriving humor from Murphy’s lack of feminine qualities” (p. 155). Dow concludes that *Murphy Brown* “has no genuine feminist politics of its own” (p. 161) and participates in the culture’s “postfeminist” turn. Indeed, Dow dismisses those who consider *Murphy Brown* a feminist success as proof of how deeply entrenched postfeminist attitudes and expectations are (p. 161).

One might think that *Murphy Brown* would be considered progressive, since Murphy’s personality and behavior can be read as directly undercutting biological essentialism and gender polarization. That is, the attributes identified by Dow are found on the masculine side of the personality ledger, proving that a successful, attractive, heterosexual female is not biologically destined for attributes traditionally considered feminine. Indeed, almost any positive portrayal of women that shows them behaving in nonstereotypical fashion would seem to be a step in the right direction. If I may be permitted to translate Dow, the problem is that when Murphy dresses, acts, and communicates in stereotypically masculine ways, *androcentrism* is reinforced.

Maybe you can see what is coming. *When one tries to address the triad of prejudice via representation, one cannot undercut all three beliefs at once.* If one portrays someone in a manner *consistent* with the dominant stereotype, even in a positive way, then one risks reinforcing essentialism and polarization (identity and difference beliefs). But if one undercuts the dominant stereotypes by portraying the member of a social group in a manner *inconsistent* with stereotypical expectations, then one risks reinforcing normative beliefs such as androcentrism, Whiteness, or heteronormativity.

A single representation *cannot* undercut all three sources of prejudice simultaneously, which is why I call Representational Correctness an Impossible Dream. As I argue later, the impossible burden we sometimes put on single representations is why we need to investigate how a character (not just isolated attributes) is understood in a larger representational ecology and to find out what sort of judgments audiences make about them. Consider the critical receptions of “strong” women, such as Lucy Lawless in *Xena*, Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens*, or Linda Hamilton in *Terminator II*—some praise the roles as feminist, while others see them as reinforcing androcentrist beliefs that equate strength with violence. Both positions, of course, may turn out to be correct. What critics need to ponder is *given* a particular historical context and the representational ecology, what sort of cultural and ideological work is the character doing (or, put another way, what is the audience doing with such representations?), and does such work advance or retard specific social goals, such as reducing sex-based discrimination? What we cannot expect from a representation is that it engages all possible cultural and ideological battles successfully at once. As we will see, a similar dilemma faces critics evaluating representations of race and sexual orientation.

“Hawk,” on *Spenser: For Hire*, was a character praised by many critics, including African American pundits, for being a strong, self-assured, and successful Black man who did not always follow the (White man’s) rules. Nevertheless, his character’s attributes are criticized by Dana L. Cloud as reinforcing racist stereotypes about Black men. “Hawk does not decapitate heroines, but his violence is often extreme. He exhibits none of Spenser’s reluctance to kill, nor does he wait to attack until attacked himself. This association with the deep-seated type of the native savage might be compelling evidence confirming the racism of an uncritical viewer” (1992, p. 318).

Cloud argues that the show functions hegemonically; that is, the program perpetuates dominant racist beliefs about Black men. “Hawk’s oppositional stance and persona, though subject to contradictory critical evaluations, serve the needs of the dominant culture to depict blacks in stereotypical ways” (1992, p. 311). Despite actor Avery Brooks’s popularity and the praise the show’s depiction of Hawk received from some Black critics, Cloud believes that her “close analysis” of the show “reveals” how the depictions “participate in a conservative, multistructured, yet hegemonic social totality” (p. 314). Like most professional critics, particularly those informed by critical theories of hegemony and/or psychoanalytic theory, Cloud implies that how the text is interpreted by audiences is largely irrelevant, since it is the expert who is best positioned to decode the text and ascertain its likely influence.

Cloud implies that those who attribute positive meaning to Hawk simply are wrong: “Images and articulations that on the surface *seem* positive and empowering can *actually* tap into deeply embedded racist types and can function in racist ways in the dominant culture” (1992, p. 314, emphasis added). Thus the differences between Hawk and Spenser reinforce essentialism and polarization, even though they arguably undercut the normativity of Whiteness.

What happens if an African American is portrayed in ways that run counter to stereotypical assumptions? The central character in the movie *Boyz n the Hood* is Tre, played by Cuba Gooding Jr. Tre’s character is constantly being pulled between his friends and his father, between being sexually and physically aggressive versus being responsible, respectful of women, and in control of his anger. The pivotal moment in the movie is when Tre decides not to accompany his friends on their way to avenge the murder of his best friend. Now this is an interesting comparison with Avery Brooks’s Hawk character, who certainly would have sought out and killed the killers of his best friend. But John Singleton’s message in *Boyz* is that the cycle of violence must end (the tagline for the movie is “Increase the peace”), and so Tre’s decision *not* to kill is key.

Sadly (to me, at least), African American feminist critic bell hooks is less than sympathetic. In an interview with Ice Cube, who played the character Doughboy (who murders his stepbrother’s murderers), hooks objects: “But Tre just came off like a wimp, a crybaby. He was just so weak. He came off weak in the movie” (1994, p. 132). Ice Cube objects: “No, to me he came off tryin’ to do the right thing. The neighborhood was really frustratin’ him out, because he was tryin’ to do the right thing and everybody else was doin’ the wrong thing. And I think Doughboy woulda been just like him if [he] had the right guidance, the right father. It’s a thin line between ’em all. Tre was about to be like Doughboy for a minute until he thought about it.” And hooks responds, “I feel like if I was a kid lookin’ at that move, I wouldn’t wanna be him, I’d wanna be you, because your character had the jazz” (1994, p. 132).⁴

The “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” logic in Representational Correctness has been noted by other critics as well. Donald Bogle (2001a, 2001b), historian of Black film and television, has been accused by one conservative critic as playing a game called “Can You Find the Stereotype?” (McWhorter, 2003, pp. 104–37). Though he oversimplifies Bogle’s work, John McWhorter’s argument is that Bogle’s interpretive framework leads to the conclusion that virtually all Black representations fail, either because they reinforce stereotypes or because the characters are inaccurate or inauthentic. It is a dilemma that McWhorter charges imposes “an unrealizable requirement upon the medium” (p. 129). Even when a “wholly new” kind of African American character comes along, such as Jaleel White’s

Urkel on *Family Matters*, either he is considered inauthentic or inaccurate (Bogle suggests, “in some respects, Urkel was deracialized”), or he is described as an updated version of a stereotype (quoting another critic)—“a modern Stepin Fetchit in the making” (Bogle, 2001a, p. 332).

I will revisit the clash between Bogle and McWhorter in chapter 7. At the moment, the point I want to stress is that media critics can end up creating a double bind for representations. Perpetuate a stereotype and one reinforces essentialism and polarization—even if a positive spin on a stereotype challenges normative beliefs such as androcentrism or White supremacy. Challenge a stereotype and one may undercut essentialism and polarization, but one can end up accused of either reinforcing discriminatory normative beliefs (like androcentrism with *Murphy Brown*) or failing to provide representational accuracy or purity (as with *Tre* or *Urkel*).

Such a double bind also has been applied in critiques of representations of sexual orientation. For example, some critics deride “Jack” on *Will & Grace* for being *too* gay and reinforcing stereotypes, and then they turn around and critique Will for not being gay *enough!* It is the same catch-22. A scholarly essay by Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow (2002) offers an in-depth analysis of *Will & Grace*. The “threat” that Jack poses to heteronormativity is acknowledged as significant but considered fatally compromised (strategically impure) by the fact that Jack is a “minor” character too campy to be taken seriously. Will is criticized for being too feminine in some scenes (making him stereotypical) and too masculine in others (reinforcing heteronormativity). For these and other reasons the authors claim that *Will & Grace* relies on conventions that reinforce heteronormativity as well as homophobia. They come to the counterintuitive conclusion that the show actually reinforces all three elements of the triad of sexual prejudice. Similarly, Robert Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus (2001) note that portrayals of gay men in *To Wong Foo* are “positive,” but they claim they are *too* positive: “The deification of these characters results in remarginalization” (p. 153). The question, of course, is whether anyone else “reads” these texts in the same way these academic critics have, and I attempt to answer that question in later chapters.

Recall that an emphasis on *difference* can be read as reinforcing essentialism and polarization, while an emphasis on *similarity* can be read as reinforcing the false universalism of androcentrism, Whiteness, and heteronormativity. This is not an easy double bind to escape. Indeed, the civil rights movement splintered in the 1960s over whether the goal of the movement should be integration or Black power; Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995) points out that the women’s movement still wrestles with whether to emphasize similarity or difference between the sexes; and R. A. Slagle (1995) argues that gay and lesbian rights movements emphasize similarities with straight folks, while queer politics rely on strategies of difference.

Stuart Hall has conceded, “We hardly begin to know how to conduct a popular anti-racist struggle or how to bend the twig of racist common sense which currently dominates popular thinking” (1981, p. 52). Such disagreements in the political realm over what the appropriate *ends* should be for these movements parallel the disagreements over what the appropriate *means* of representation should be in the mass media.

What To Do Differently: An Overview of the Rest of This Book

Overall, we paid critics need to raise our expectations so that our work is more sophisticated than it is now. How we should go about such a task is the subject of the remainder of this book, but as a starting point we must recognize that no representation is going to be perfectly accurate, ideologically pure, and innocent of any possible offense. We need to get past the point where we damn representations with the label “ambivalent.” All images are ambivalent and ambiguous. All are impure from someone’s perspective. To understand the social significance of a particular representation requires a critic to understand the psychological and cultural work it performs for specific audiences. The remainder of this book explores some possible paths to such an understanding.

In chapter 2 I argue that we professional critics need to do more audience research. Recall that there is typically a two-step process in most (though not all) criticism of popular media. First an argument is made that a given text *means* such and such (whether the meaning is obvious or subtle, conscious or unconscious, explicit or subtextual) and second that such meanings *influence* those who experience them. Even if we grant to certain schools of criticism that mass audiences are unaware of the ideological work of various popular texts, there remains an argumentative burden to prove the second step—that such audiences are influenced in the way(s) we think they are. We need to find out what people are doing with representations rather than being limited to making claims about what we think representations are doing to people. By using contrasting approaches to the films *The Firm* and *Jurassic Park*, I suggest that one’s audience conjectures are much more persuasive if supported through audience research.

In chapter 3 I suggest that we need to recognize multiple audiences. It has been thoroughly documented that different social groups use media and read texts differently. What is rhetorically salient to one audience may not be so for another, and what an audience member finds important plays a pivotal role in her or his decoding of a text. It simply does not make sense to make claims of the form X is Y or X causes Y without adding *for audience Z*. Through an analysis of a number of studies of the popular television show *Will & Grace*, we can learn a lot about how the

critique of popular criticism succeeds or fails by noting how differently professional and unpaid critics create and decode texts; specifically, I critique the political economy of textual analysis by arguing that the need to exercise “professional vision” leads some critics to decode popular texts in a way that risks missing how mainstream audiences understand such texts. One way to reconceptualize academic criticism is to view *all* popular media criticism as based on audience reception analysis—the only question is *which* audience.

In chapter 4 I contend that a key element of audience analysis ought to be understanding the sorts of *judgments* that audience members make about characters—their likability, perceived similarity, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and so on. More important than a critic’s ability to spot the similarity between an individual character and a recognizable stereotype is the sort of judgment that audience members are making, not only about the individual character but also about the social group of which the individual is a part. By explicating what my colleagues and I call the “parasocial contact hypothesis,” I suggest that the key to understanding how representations can influence attitudes about social groups, such as gay men and male transvestites, is to understand the “category work” that popular media such as *Six Feet Under*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *Eddie Izzard: Dress to Kill* can perform. What do we *learn* about a category of people with whom we may be relatively unfamiliar? And if we have positive feelings toward and judgments about minority group representatives in a popular culture text, then how might our feelings and judgments transfer to the minority group as a whole?

In chapter 5 I attempt to illustrate how we can make our talk about representations more precise and productive by moving past the “Can You Find the Stereotype?” game. While it is easy enough to spot the stereotypes in Michael Crichton’s *Disclosure*, their significance depends on the psychological and cultural work they perform in the early 1990s with U.S. audiences. Such rhetorical work is performed in the way a particular character instantiates a recognizable social type: the attributes the character demonstrates, whether the character’s dramatic choices are rewarded or punished, and how the audience is “coached” to judge the character through a process I call “vicarious operant conditioning.” By making specific, recognizable character and social types appealing and other recognizable character and social types unappealing, a text can contribute to or retard social progress. Though critics’ conjectures about the judgments audiences make about various characters should be subject to verification, textual and audience analysis can work together to chart the rhetorical work of popular texts.

In chapter 6 I describe my efforts in a class on “Masculinity and Film” to teach critical media literacy so that students can become more

sophisticated critics of the representational work that film performs. Data gathered from a sample classroom effort suggest that students can learn to be more critical viewers, become more tolerant toward minority groups, but they are unlikely to change the way they believe they “ought” to behave in terms of gender performance.

In chapter 7 I summarize my suggestions for moving beyond Representational Correctness. I suggest that we need to strategize about which parts of the triad of prejudice are most important to undercut for specific social groups and audiences in order to understand how media representations contribute to such a process. Our readings of popular media need to be context-sensitive yet multidimensional and recognize that representations function in multiple ways. For example, a study in Australia suggests that just having gay characters in mainstream media may play an important role in overcoming “the low self-esteem and suicidal tendencies of young gay men” (McKee, 2000). In such a context, I would happily trade off a little essentializing and polarization if it would decrease the potentially fatal consequences of heteronormativity.

Throughout this book, it will be clear that I believe scholars need to integrate social scientific with humanistic theories and methodologies. Rhetorical (text-centered) critical media scholars are very good at analyzing texts and telling a compelling story about what happens in and through public discourse and representations. We have tended to situate our stories into grand narratives that involve the dominance of patriarchy and/or capitalism. We have generally done a far less successful job of integrating our stories with theories of social psychology (on stereotypes and attitude theory, for example) or with theories about how the media influences people (cultivation theory, or social learning theory) and how people use the media (uses and gratification theory) (cf. Livingstone, 1998b). *None* of the textual analyses discussed previously makes any connection to relevant social psychological literature. I suspect that we can do better than that.