

**Thinking About What We See:
Using Media Literacy to Examine Images of
African Americans on Television**

By Paula Tosi

Gainer noted that in 1986, Marcus and Fischer presented the idea of “crisis of representation,” which looks at how societal paradigms dictate the representation of reality in the social sciences.¹ The representation of cultures in television and film has created over the years a reality in which stereotypes thrive. In the late 1960s, as more televisions found their way into the American home, Marshall McLuhan argued that “television constituted much more than mere entertainment.”² Educators who are aware of how media influences the lives of their students have the opportunity to teach students the language of media, and how to become literate consumers of the media-rich environment in which we live.

This article examines how African American stereotypes have been represented in television media historically and how those representations have been recirculated, promoting generations of consumers who have become desensitized to the negative messages these stereotypes convey. The social studies classroom is an excellent arena for discussing the cultural effects stereotypical representations have had on how individuals perceive African Americans globally, nationally, locally, and in the classroom.

Historical Perspective

Children have been watching television for over 60 years, and have been considered consumers of this medium since 1950. The creators of children’s media have been able to mold and shape entire generations simply by portraying people of color in ways that fit into societal stereotypes. Over the last 60 years, this stereotyped portrayal of diverse cultures has become far subtler, which has had a far more detrimental effect on the child consumer.

Bruner³ indicated in his study looking at veridical perception that individuals will learn, through the repetition of an occurrence, how to perceive an object or worldview. Ford⁴ expands on this idea in his study, which looks at how televised stereotypes affect an individual’s perception of a particular racial group. The outcome of this study showed that when

individuals (regardless of race) were shown African Americans in stereotyped roles, they were more likely to make a negative judgment of an African American “target” person. Ford concludes that as a culture, we have been so inundated with viewing races in stereotypical roles that we have developed a laissez-faire attitude toward how race is portrayed in television.⁵ Seldom do individuals challenge how race or gender is portrayed in televised programs because it has become normalized.

Li-Vollmer⁶ looks at how children are targeted by television advertisers and notes the findings of Gray,⁷ who stated, “Race representations in the media frequently legitimate and maintain the terms of the dominant cultural and social order that situates Whites at the top of privilege and power hierarchies.” Li-Vollmer goes on to stress the 1987 work of Calvert and Huston and the 1976 work of Katz, who stated, “Not only are children still developing their schemas about groups of people, but they also have not yet developed the cognitive ability to critically evaluate the validity and acceptability of stereotypes.”⁸ Li-Vollmer’s study theorizes that children will develop many of their perceptions of race based on how they categorize the portrayal of race in created media, which some children may have more exposure to than actual real-world situations in which they can create a more authentic schema. The outcome of this study also showed that individuals inundated with media messages that portray races in positions considered subservient (or lower than the status quo) will also develop schemas that nurture ambivalence, which creates a culture of viewers that only see the explicit message and do not see the need to critically analyze the often implicit message being portrayed in both commercial and regular television programs.

Current Trends

At the beginning of each year, I have students participate in a “getting to know me” activity in which they bring artifacts from home into the classroom and give a brief speech about why the things they have chosen are important to them. This is a wonderful icebreaking activity because the students and I get a good sense of the diverse personalities that are in class and the values and experiences they bring into our community. As students have shared their artifacts over the last ten years, I have noticed that students are exhibiting clear indicators that they have developed schemas in accordance with the aforementioned

studies. They are only seeing the explicit messages that they are being targeted to see and are unaware of implicit messages being directed at them.

Prior to beginning the unit, I show images of individuals who might be viewed as socially unacceptable or in some way undesirable to the status quo. Students make judgments based on what they have become accustomed to believing is the “right” way for a person in a certain position to look. What I find most disturbing about the outcomes from this activity is that students tend to label individuals that express their unique cultural identities as socially deviant or unacceptable, and they do not understand how the rich diversity that exists in our class community is a virtue. As a result, I have witnessed and heard students denigrate others who choose to embrace their cultural differences by resorting to stereotypes and slurs. Classroom discussions have shown that students understand what stereotypes and biases are, but they do not know how they are formed or the effect they can have on cultures and communities—including, sometimes, their own. Hence, it becomes a challenge for teachers to help their students not only understand basic skills and content encouraged through the explicit curriculum of the school and the state, but also skills necessary to critically understand their social world, including media and popular culture.

Historical Recirculation of Stereotypes

Donald Bogle’s seminal text, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, examines how the Hollywood film industry has portrayed African Americans in movies and the recurring stereotypical characters that appear. Bogle’s research on well-known African American actors indicates that one of the main reasons these types of roles keep appearing is due in part to the desire to work! Hollywood is a highly competitive industry, and typically stories are told that cater to a largely White audience. Therefore, many African American actresses such as Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen played maids because those were typically the only roles offered to African American women. However, as time progressed and attitudes changed, ignorance, acceptance, and the institutionalization of these roles by the individuals working in the entertainment industry as producers, casting agents, directors, and other studio executives did not change significantly.⁹

Bogle confirms what current research indicates regarding the acceptance of stereotypes both outside and inside specific cultures. He spent many years trying to find the information that would provide a rationale for why the media industry consistently portrayed African Americans in roles that perpetuated certain cultural stereotypes. Based on his research, there appears to be a certain amount of media illiteracy within the industry itself, and despite recent attempts at nullifying stereotypical African American portrayals, in many cases an unintended message can be found running concurrent with the intended one. For example, although shows like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Good Times*, *The Chappelle Show*, *The Cosby Show*, or *The Boondocks* brilliantly challenge stereotypes of African Americans, there tends to be a backlash in which those shows, against the wishes of the creators, perpetuate stereotypes. Although *The Chappelle Show* and *The Boondocks* are not necessarily appropriate for younger viewers, they are often seen as promoting stereotypes. This blaming is a result of a largely uncritical mass that looks only at the surface and not at the deeper meaning behind the jokes and language.

While Bogle’s first book focuses primarily on the film industry, his text *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television* focuses on the television industry, which has also been guilty of recirculating African American stereotypes.¹⁰ These include actors portraying characters in servant roles where they are taken for granted, such as in the shows *Beulah*, *Hazel*, and *Gimme a Break*, or exaggerated, poor, clownish roles, as seen in *Good Times*. Many of these television roles are recreations of the roles seen in the film industry.¹¹ There are, of course, exceptions to every rule: looking back at the history of television, there are a handful of programs that portray African Americans equitably, most notably *The Cosby Show* and *Frank’s Place*. *Frank’s Place* is an especially interesting show, since it displayed the diversity of the African American community, but CBS, the network it aired on in the late 1980s, was not sure of how to market the show and subsequently cancelled it due to low ratings.

In short, representations of African Americans are changing, but much more work needs to be done and the media industry will not change unless viewers demand that change. Hence, there is a need to help our nation’s youth become more media-literate and understanding of both the intended and unintended messages coming out of Hollywood.



Need for Media Literacy Instruction

In the social studies and English/language arts classrooms, student literacy instruction primarily focuses on the decoding of words and understanding print media. The 21st century student lives in a “digitized world” rich with technology that combines graphic visuals and print as well as images and sounds designed to convey complete thoughts and ideas.¹² As students become more technologically capable, they also need to become technologically literate. Often, students struggle with bringing critical thinking applications from one classroom into another. So while a student may be able to critically examine a piece of text that looks at how a given race is portrayed or stereotyped, that same student might struggle at seeing the same type of injustice portrayed on television or in film.

The middle school social studies classroom is not merely a setting for studying the history of societies. There is also a need to provide students with relevant instruction that will enable them to analyze the world in which they live. Because adolescent children consume a staggering amount of television, teaching media literacy is an excellent platform to help students learn to analyze programming in order to become educated consumers of the media. Having students learn this ability using something that is familiar to them will enable them to transfer the skills to other areas of social studies and literary practices where they will need to analyze how certain groups and individuals function in their social setting.

There are few recent studies that look at how a child’s perception of culture and the self is affected by television viewing. According to the A.C. Nielsen Co., the average American youth spends 1,500 hours watching television each year.¹³ Because television is the most viewed medium by today’s teen consumer, the two areas that need the most focus in terms of teaching literacy are commercial and regular programming.

My classroom is a diverse classroom with a mix of ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and learning abilities. My students tend to struggle with understanding the relevance of learning history, regardless of whether it is ancient history, world history, or American history. They do not see how the information will help them as they go on to college and pursue careers. The following lesson is an effective way to connect historic representations with current trends and further encourages students to critically challenge the roots and social contexts of media, a fundamental critical skill for collegiate-level thinking. This lesson also teaches students to analyze the media that they are viewing and readjust schemas that have developed over years of media programming.

(Endnotes)

1. J. S. Gainer, "Critical Media Literacy in Middle School: Exploring the Politics of Representation," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 53, no. 5 (2010): 366.
2. D. Considine, J. Horton, & G. Moorman, "Teaching and Reading the Millennial Generation Through Media Literacy," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52, no. 6 (2009): 475.
3. J. Bruner, "On Perceptual Readiness," *Psychological Review* 54, no. 2 (1957): 126-148.
4. T. E. Ford, "Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals of African-Americans on Person Perception," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (1997): 266-272.
5. Ibid.
6. M. Li-Vollmer, "Race Representation in Child-Targeted Television Commercials," *Mass Communication & Society* 5, no. 2 (2002): 207-208.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. D. Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).
10. D. Bogle, *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 2001).
11. Ibid.
12. G.E. Marcus, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999).
13. Retrieved from <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/measurement/television-measurement.html>

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- D. Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).
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Lesson Plan

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Connection to Middle/High School Students

Millennial students are bombarded every day by visual messages from billboards, bumper stickers, advertisements, newspapers, magazines, movies, and most pervasively, television. These messages can influence them in either positive or negative ways depending on both the message and the interpretation of the message. Students should be able to read and understand the messages and content of the media they consume in order to distinguish between factual representations of reality and fictional ones. When youth become more media literate, they can further develop skills necessary for critical consciousness and develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which inequity and inequality function in society.

Goals

The primary goal for this lesson is to help students gain a basic understanding of media literacy practices as related to the television programming they consume. By the end of this lesson, students will be able to critique and discuss representations of African Americans on television and make reasoned statements about how representations affect how groups are seen in society.

Objectives

- Students will display an understanding of the five concepts in media literacy.
- Students will recognize and evaluate the representation of groups in the media, particularly African American students, and the social and cultural impact of those representations.
- Students will conceptualize television as a business that is tied to profit.

NCSS Standards

I. Culture

- b. Give examples of how experiences may be interpreted differently by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference;
- e. Give examples and describe the importance of cultural unity and diversity within and across groups.

VI. Power, Authority, & Governance

- a. Examine the rights and responsibilities of the individual in relation to his or her social group, such as family, peer groups, and school class;
- h. Recognize and give examples of the tensions between the wants and needs of individuals and groups, and concepts such as fairness, equity, and justice.

IX. Global Connections

- a. Explore ways that language, art, music, belief systems, and other cultural elements may facilitate global understanding or lead to misunderstanding;
- b. Give examples of conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among individuals, groups, and nations;
- c. Examine the effects of changing technologies on the global community;
- f. Investigate concerns, issues, standards, and conflicts related to universal human rights, such as the treatment of children, religious groups, and effects of war.

X. Civic Ideals & Practices

- c. Locate, access, organize, and apply information about an issue of public concern from multiple points of view;
- d. Identify and practice selected forms of civic discussion and participation consistent with the ideals of citizens in a democratic republic;

Warm-Up/Anticipatory Set (Day 1)

Open with a quick poll of television viewing habits, asking a range of questions that could include the following:

- How many of you watch television daily?
- How many hours a week do you watch TV, estimate?
- Does television have an influence on the decisions you make? (This is a yes/no question, but their responses can be used to frame your discussion.)
- Does television have an influence on how you think about people?

Use Clickers for polling if you have access to them. If you do not, then ask students to either write down their responses or ask them to signify by a show of hands. Then ask what programs students watch and write them down on the chalkboard or Smart Board. For effect, during the survey and as you introduce the lesson, run a PowerPoint presentation of diverse images of African Americans in media. Be sure to utilize both current and historic representations, and both positive and negative images. Images can easily be found through Google.

Activities

(You should begin the lesson on a Friday to give yourself more time to acquire clips, as the ideas and interests of the students guide this lesson. It is fundamental to remember that this lesson encourages students to be more thoughtful about the media they consume and not necessarily about historic media practices.)

In advance, create a PowerPoint presentation of the Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions for Media Literacy as expressed by the Center for Media Literacy. Engage the students in a guided discussion about the fundamentals of media literacy. The essential media literacy concepts and questions for analysis are as follows:

Five Core Concepts of Media Literacy

1. All media messages/representations are constructed. (Meaning: choices are made regarding what we see and hear.)
2. Media messages/images are constructed using a creative language with its own rules. (Meaning: the media industries—film, television, radio, and advertising—use a technical language that is unique.)
3. Different people experience the same messages/representations differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view. (Meaning: the values and points of view circulated through media reflect the values and points of view of those making decisions and are further influenced by the tastes of the majority of the viewing public or market.)
5. Media messages are constructed to gain profit and/or power. (Meaning: all we see and hear in the media is meant to make a profit, since it costs money to keep a media outlet or manufacturer in business.)

Five Key Questions for Media Literacy

1. Who created this message/representation?
2. What techniques are used to attract your attention?
3. How might different people understand this message/representation differently from me?
4. What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message?
5. Why was this message/representation sent?

After the PowerPoint presentation and discussion, model utilizing the questions with your students by screening a short clip of your choice (one which you feel most comfortable). Conclude by asking students to name or list television programs, commercials, or music videos they view regularly.

Day 2 (Monday)

- Pull four or five advertisements and music videos from youtube.com or hulu.com that students offered in the previous class, and analyze each clip using the Five Key Questions for Media Literacy. Do the representations of African Americans in these clips represent African Americans in their broad diversity? Is this good or bad/fair or unfair for our society and why?

Day 3

- Screen an entire episode of a program that seemed to have much “buzz” from the students. You can obtain episodes through sources like hulu.com, Netflix, local video stores, and possibly youtube.com. You can also find full episodes to view online by conducting a Google search. Be sure your computer has the correct system requirements. If your school has a block on select websites like youtube.com, you may have to rent or purchase the title, or check it out from your local library.
- For the assessment, have the students answer questions about the program using the Five Key Questions for Media Literacy and any other question(s) you wish for them to engage. Have students get into small groups to further collaborate and analyze the program.
- Have a summarizing discussion about the texts screened during that class and the previous class.

- Be sure to highlight the idea that representations of African Americans (and other groups of color) do not necessarily reflect the broad diversity of those groups and under-representation can also be seen as a negative representation. Ask, “How does this affect the ways in which we see people from those groups?” Close by asking the students how their understanding of what they see on television has changed as a result of the lesson.
- Note: Invariably students (and adults) may express the idea that TV is just entertainment and “too much is being read” into television programs. This is a valid concern, but misses the point. Media industries spend and make billions of dollars a year, and as such there is a great amount of attention paid to what viewers see and hear through media. But, more importantly, media reflects ideas and values about life and society, and if we see one group represented in limited ways, over time, society tends to accept those representations as truth. Hence, the need to critically examine media. It is not the purpose here to stop students from consuming media: rather, the purpose is to make them more aware of how media functions and the impact representations can have on target groups and society in general.

Assessment

Have students select one of the following assignments:

- Create a commercial or advertisement for one of their favorite brands. The commercial/advertisement should feature an African American representation that is fair and equitable.
- Create a public service announcement that helps the consumer understand media literacy.
- Draft a blog post that questions or challenges and reflects on the representations of African Americans in media.
- Write a network executive a business letter that challenges the ways the network portrays African Americans in their programming.
- Create a review of a television program that focuses on how racial/ethnic characters are or are not represented.

Parent and Teacher Resources

- Center for Media Literacy: <http://www.medialit.org>
- Media Awareness Network: http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/teachers/media_literacy/key_concept.cfm
- Media Education Lab: <http://mediaeducationlab.com/what-media-literacy-0>