



TELEVISION CRITICISM 3

VICTORIA O'DONNELL ■ ■ ■ EDITION



THIRD EDITION

Television CRITICISM

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Representation and Its Audience

Illusion holds you captive still.

—Mephistopheles to Faust (Goethe, *Faust*)

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 6, the concept of representation was presented as a television code, a range of audiovisual systems that has the capability to construct meanings. The concept of representation is central to the study of television. Television provides a continual flow of images and sounds that link viewers to the world. Television production shapes how an event unfolds and limits the meanings of what is seen. Television mediates reality by selecting and interpreting images in order to present them to the viewers. Representation of people and events is encoded by technical codes with the camera, lighting, sound, music, and editing in order to convey the narrative, conflict, character action, dialogue, setting, casting, and so on. Representational codes work together to encode a preferred meaning, yet at the same time to present the illusion of naturalness.

Because it is impossible to show everything on television, selection of images is necessary. The task of news is to represent the realities of daily life from all over the world. What we know about people in places such as Israel, Palestine, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, China, Japan, Russia, Egypt, Libya, Darfur, the Sudan, and Kenya is very likely to come from television and the Internet. Television drama and situation comedies have representations of women, men, husbands, wives, parents, grandparents, children, race, ethnic groups, gays, transgenders, age, rich, poor, class, doctors, lawyers, police, firefighters, religious leaders, people from different parts of America and the world, and so forth. How do we know that what we see resembles the actual people and places? Furthermore, does it matter to us if they do or do not? Which groups are included and which are excluded? By understanding the concept of representation, the television critic can attempt to answer these

questions. This chapter is an examination of representation and explains what representation is; how it impacts a viewer; what role it plays in the depiction of gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, and class on television; and how it affects a society's **collective memory**.

WHAT IS REPRESENTATION?

Visual representation means to project an image of someone or something—to re-present. Even though the image will seldom be realistic in size because it depends upon the dimensions of the television or digital device screen, the viewer is expected to accept the image as realistic even though it is framed by a camera. As we saw in Chapter 6, verbal representation means that language stands in the place of someone or something, requiring that meaning to be learned. Verbal representation varies from language to language. Visual representation also means that images stand in the place of someone or something, and it requires learning and interpreting the meanings as well.

A common definition of **representation** is “a given which the act of representation duplicates in one way or another” (Iser in Krieger, 1987, p. 217). Stuart Hall, in his book *Representation*, emphasized meaning in the “language” of words, sounds, and images in his definition of representation:

The production of meaning through language. . . . Any sound, word, image, or object which functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning is, from this point of view “a language.” (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013, p. 5)

Representation was defined by W. J. T. Mitchell (1995) in his book *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* as a fabricated stand-in for culture, suggesting the “constructed, artificial character of forms of life, in contrast to the organic biological connotations of ‘culture’” (p. 423). Photographs, paintings, film, television, and computer images are forms of visual representation. They attempt to duplicate objects, places, or persons, but they are not truly duplicates. Rather, they are substitutes that resemble what they attempt to duplicate or imitate. Skill in duplication, such as perspective in art to give a two-dimensional canvas the sense of a real three-dimensional view or knowledge of light and shadow to harness realism in photography and film, is as important to a sense of accuracy as it is to illusion in these media. Jen Webb (2009), in her book *Understanding Representation*, explained, “Representation is *made* to happen . . . to construct meaning” (pp. 8, 30).

If the representation is a surrogate for the original, then it could be used as the original might function. This suggests that representation, although it is not the original, presents an illusion of the original and its function. Thus, a representative image *imitates* the real. It is an attempt to *substitute a resemblance* in order that a viewer may recognize it as real. An image is *constructed to re-present* someone or something. If it resembles the real, it has *verisimilitude*, an appearance of truth. In other words, it appears to be natural or real.

TELEVISION REPRESENTATION

Television images are complex because they are based on visual representation. Television images are mediated images—three-dimensional places, people, and objects viewed on a two-dimensional plane—not life-size, and produced by technical means controlled by camera angles and movement, lighting, and computer manipulation. High-definition TV has the capability of giving the illusion of three dimensions as does 3-D television, which has limited availability. Acting, directing, camera work, lighting, and editing create a sense of intimacy, emotion, excitement, and other feelings. As we saw in Chapter 3, television employs art directors and set dressers to create realistic-appearing places, such as living rooms, restaurants, offices, hospitals, and other settings. When we see them in a camera frame, these images are reduced to the size of the screen depending on the screen's dimensions—from a small smartphone screen to a gigantic television screen. Huge television screens at concerts or in open-air locales increase the actual size of people and objects, but residential television sets and computer screens do not show the show's sets that are as large as the actual studio sets. The actual sets in the television studio often have three walls with the **fourth wall** open to the cameras, directors, producers, writers, and, in the case of situation comedies, an audience. Because the person who watches a program on television cannot see the entire studio or stage, one could say that representation conceals as well as reveals. If a scene is outdoors, set in wintertime snow, for example, the material used to create the illusion of snow is artificial. Projections on green screens create illusions of the real. Yet the viewer can accept the image as a duplication of a given reality although what is real is represented by an imitation of it. Thus, that which is represented is *re-presented* by a substitute, an imitation. Its effectiveness is dependent on the viewer's recognizing and accepting it. In order to achieve this kind of viewer response, the image must *resemble* that which is real. In other words, the image to be accepted as real has to correspond to the viewer's experience of three-dimensional space. On the other hand, fantasy images such as monsters, dinosaurs, aliens, and space ships lack real referents in viewers' experiences, although they may respond to them as if they were real.

INTERPRETING REPRESENTATION

Ultimately, the viewer decides if an image resembles reality. The old adage “seeing is believing” can also be construed as “believing is seeing.” How we perceive is influenced by our values, beliefs, and experiences, thus a television representation is constructed via the perceptual filters of the television producers and seen through the perceptual lens of the viewer.

A television situation comedy uses a representation of a funny situation to provoke audience laughter, but the audience must be able to relate it to familiar experiences in order to comprehend the humor. David Marc (1984) wrote that the situation comedy is a representational form of American culture: “It dramatizes national types, styles, customs, issues, and language” (p. 13).

Television viewers may derive meaning from representations, and, because reality has multiple meanings to people, representations also constitute multiple meanings (polysemy). It is also quite possible that a representation may have no meaning to a viewer, or it may have a large range of meanings. The viewer interprets what is represented within a cultural context and locates meaning according to beliefs, values, and experience, thus an image does not have a fixed meaning. Images can touch levels of experience, according to Hall (1999):

beyond the purely rational level of awareness, and which disturb by the very way in which they exceed meaning. The cultural practices of looking and seeing, then . . . rest on complex conditions of existence, some of which have psychic and unconscious dimensions of which the behavioral definition of meaning's "effects" has only a very reductionist understanding. (pp. 311–312)

RECEPTION OF TELEVISUAL IMAGES

Television and its viewers comprise a communication system of senders and receivers, messages, the transmission of the messages through a medium, and reception by viewers. The sender encodes through technologically enhanced representations and symbol systems comprised of words, sounds, and images. The receiver decodes meanings by selecting and interpreting images, sounds, and words, and assigning meanings to them. Viewers have certain expectations of established program conventions (as described in Chapter 5, "Television Genres") that color their responses. Producers of television have certain goals that they want to achieve—for example, to have viewers perceive images as natural, to provoke laughter, or to gain a faithful following for a series or a network. Often there is immediate feedback from viewers that producers encourage on Twitter. Some television programs, mostly the competitive reality shows such as *American Idol* and *Dancing With the Stars*, give viewers feedback opportunities to text, call, or use the online website to vote for contestants, and the Internet offers many opportunities for viewers to give their opinions of television programs. Program websites solicit responses from viewers, displaying them in their "community" links and offering prizes such as free trips to see that particular show being made. There are invitations to Facebook sites where viewers are asked to make comments and even rate the shows. The ratings system is still the primary means for television producers to gauge viewer responses in terms of numbers of people watching.

Viewer reception is dependent upon **perception** of mediated images. Perception is the process of extracting information from outside ourselves as well as from within ourselves. How we perceive is based on "complex psychological, philosophical, and practical habitual thought patterns that we carry over from past experiences" (Hayward, 1997, p. 73). Each individual has a perceptual field that is unique to that person and formed by the influences of values, roles, self-image, and cultural norms. Each of these shapes how a person perceives. The connection between perception and cognition leads to the cultural formation of meanings related to what is seen. Recognition of most meanings tends to be automatic because people have learned them. As Hall (2013) wrote, "All sorts of objects, people, and

events are correlated with a set of concepts or *mental representations* which we carry around in our heads. Without them, we could not interpret the world meaningfully at all” (p. 4). The concepts Hall referred to are organized, arranged, and classified into complex relations with one another. “Meaning,” he wrote, “depends upon the relationship between things in the world—people, objects, and events, real or fictional—and the conceptual system, which can operate as *mental representations* of them” (p. 4). Because people broadly share conceptual systems and thus make sense of the world in roughly the same way, they can communicate with one another.

That is indeed what it means when we say we “belong to the same culture.” Because we interpret the world in roughly similar ways, we are able to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together. That is why “culture” is sometimes defined in terms of “shared meanings or shared conceptual maps.” (p. 4)

When a thing is different from the usual mental representation, confusion results in the attempt to recognize it. Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner (1973) conducted experiments on perception wherein he had college students recognize playing cards. In one group he switched the colors, so the hearts and diamonds were black instead of red, and the spades and clubs were red instead of black. The students had difficulty recognizing the color-reversed cards. They tried to regularize what they saw by saying the red six of clubs was really a black six of clubs. In extreme cases, if people have no familiarity with a thing, they may not perceive it at all. As we saw in the previous chapter, a wide variety of meanings (polysemy) can be made depending upon the viewer and the context.

SYMBOLS

A **symbol** differs from an imitative representation, for it stands for something else but does not attempt to accurately duplicate it. A Valentine’s Day card in the shape of a heart may symbolize love, or the empty boots in the stirrups of a saddle on a riderless horse may symbolize the death of a hero or heroine. Although both symbols and representations rely upon relationships or connections between the image and the receiver of the image, they are connections that are achieved in different ways. A connection between a symbol and its referent is not necessarily causal as is a visual representation of, for example, a living room on television. The heart-shaped symbol “♥” stands for the word “love” in our culture, but the connection between the symbol and its meaning had to be learned. In a culture where the heart-shaped symbol has no known meaning, it is unlikely to get a response, or it may get a different response. On the other hand, an anatomical drawing of a human heart should be a representation of a real human heart to anyone anywhere in the world who has adequate knowledge of human anatomy. In other words, a symbol is understood only because there are shared conventional meanings (Webb, 2009, p. 148). We have learned to attach certain meanings to words, and when they are familiar enough, their presence stimulates a kind of recognition of something similar in our experience. We learn to attach

meanings to visual symbols in the same manner that we have learned the meanings of words in our language. Michelle King, co-creator of *The Good Wife*, deliberately had butterfly designs incorporated into the living room coasters, on a bathroom shelf, and a framed exhibit of butterfly wings in the show's set because they symbolize fragility and freedom, just like Alicia, the show's star, who is testing her wings. In one scene, at her husband's celebration on being elected to office, Alicia learned that he had slept with her best friend. She wore a bright red dress to symbolize her rage (Hoffman, 2011, p. 1). To appreciate the symbolism, we have to understand the meaning of the butterflies and the red dress. They are important subtexts in the narrative.

THE ILLUSION OF REALITY

Television images are both symbolic and representational. The camera records and/or transmits both live and filmed moving images that represent people, places, and events that symbolize ideas, values, activities, and other concepts. Although people may respond to television as if they are seeing something firsthand, they are not. What they see is an image of something that someone else has selected, created, or recorded. Images are constructed to perpetuate the illusion that what we see is natural and believable. Representation in television has come to be regarded, for the most part, as a realistic appropriation of the world. What viewers see on television are images demanding to be recognized as real.

Seeing something through a moving image camera is never the same as seeing it with the naked eye. All the facets inherent in the technology come into play to create a unique view. In addition to the production techniques used to transmit images, sound in the form of dialogue, music, and background elements is also important, for it assists in the interpretation of the image and has representative capability. A harsh musical chord in the context of a frightening event, for example, can represent danger. The dialogue that the actors speak conveys not just interaction but also attitude and intentions. Computer technology enables technicians to create elaborate illusions that appear to be real, but, in fact, are so far from reality that viewers can no longer assume that what they perceive was ever real. Computer technology can turn a group of five people into a crowd of 500 or place a deceased person like Frank Sinatra in a television commercial that appears to have him talking to a live actor about a product.

THE NEED FOR IMAGES

Often a viewer responds to an image because there is a need for it. William Wordsworth, the early 19th-century poet, said that people *need* images because people want a sense of who their fellow human beings are in order to have a sense of identity. Raymond Williams (1989) agreed with Wordsworth, adding that we need representations of what life is like both in our own culture and in others. This is why we watch the National Geographic and Discovery channels in addition to programming that is set in our own country. That is why we are glued to television sets when revolution occurs in countries like Egypt or when

natural disasters occur such as tsunamis and earthquakes like the one that struck in Japan. Millions of Americans watched the royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton as the images of the couple were repeatedly shown on television and on websites. Subsequently, viewers watched as the televised royal couple made appearances with their newborn babies, first Prince George then Princess Charlotte. Williams said that our society “has been dramatized by the inclusion of constant dramatic representation as a daily habit and need” (p. 7).

French psychiatrist Octave Mannoni claimed that people have “a persisting need to posit ‘an other scene’ of absolute, untroubled faith, whether that ‘other scene’ be primitive cultures, an epoch’s own past, an individual’s childhood” (Ray, 1985, p. 36). Further, Mannoni maintained that although people know that what they see is an illusion, they also want to believe it. Translated from the French, Mannoni’s premise was “I know very well that this illusion is only an illusion, but nevertheless, some part of me still believes in it” (p. 36). This double system of belief enables audience members who know that what they see on fictional television is not real to become absorbed in it as if it were real.

Thus, the impact of representation is that a need is fulfilled. Individuals may have specific needs that are satisfied from various kinds of representations of characters, plots, and action in television, but all television viewers have some kind of a need for representation.

REPRESENTATION OF THE “OTHER”

The concept of the “Other” stems from George Herbert Mead’s (1934) social psychology and symbolic interaction. Initially it was defined as a symbolic unity located outside of the self and associated with one or more other individuals, real or fictional people (O’Sullivan et al., 1994). Cultural, queer, and feminist studies have appropriated the concept of the other to mean

a person, persons, group, social class, community, race or nation who are not “us” and who are defined by their difference from us; yet who by that difference contribute to our concept of self, as individuals, members of groups, etc. (Watson & Hill, 2003, p. 209)

There is a generalized “other” as in “*Some people watch reality shows on television, but I prefer drama.*” The “other” can also be a positive role model, a real or fictional person, someone who is respected and sets a good example to follow. In television studies, the “other” usually represents a group that people fear, dislike, or feel superior to, resulting in a “them and us” attitude. Dominant groups who have power over representation on television may endow subordinate groups with certain characteristics and habits, turning them into the “other.” When a group is the “other,” individual differences tend to be lost, for the members of the group are homogenized into a collective “them.” Such categories of identity are contrived to appear natural as if determined by biology or psychology. These categories also result in stereotypes that completely ignore individual personalities. As Hall (2013) explains, “Stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics

which are represented as fixed by Nature.” Stereotyping sets up a barrier between the acceptable and unacceptable, what belongs and what is “Other.” “It sends into symbolic exile all of them—the Others—who are in some way different” (p. 247).

Film, radio, and television in the past were notorious for stereotyping gender, race, and ethnicity. Today one has to look carefully for notions of the “other” on television. Shows such as *Lost* and *Grey’s Anatomy* feature diversity in their characters. The characters on *Lost* were African American, Korean, Iraqi, Hispanic, and Whites from America and Australia. Daniel Dae Kim, a Korean-born actor who grew up in New York and Philadelphia, who played Jin on *Lost*, said,

Nobody wants tokenism, and that’s one of the reasons I’m so proud of this show. It shows America and television executives and movie producers that you don’t have to have a lily-white cast of twentysomethings to have a successful project. The story lines speak to America regardless of color and can even be enhanced by mixtures of race and gender. (Fernandez, 2005, p. E30)

John Wells, whose company produced *The West Wing* and *Shameless*, said that producers have a duty to develop interesting characters, not racial types:

If racial identity is the only thing that’s interesting about a character, that’s extremely limiting and also insulting to how society works now. Sometimes in an attempt to diversify shows, the characters become stereotypical because they’re there for the purpose of providing diversity and you’re trying to write to that instead of trying to write human beings. (Fernandez, 2005, p. E30)

When Michael Crichton wrote the pilot for *ER*, he did not specify gender or race for any of the doctor characters on the show. The *ER* doctors were male, female, African American, Puerto Rican, East Indian, Croatian, White, and disabled. The diverse results came from good casting. Presently, several sit-coms feature a variety of ethnic actors in the casts—for example, Kunal Nayyar, an East Indian, in *The Big Bang Theory*; Gina Rodriguez, who is of Puerto Rican descent, in *Jane the Virgin*; and Korean American Randall Park in *Fresh Off the Boat*, a show about a Taiwanese American family, the first Asian situation comedy on television in 20 years. There is also a number of ethnic actors in drama on television—for example, Lucy Liu, daughter of Chinese immigrants, in *Elementary*, Steven Yeun, son of South Korean immigrants, in *The Walking Dead*; and Benito Martinez, a Mexican American, along with a diverse cast in *American Crime*.

Shonda Rhimes is the executive producer of three dramas on ABC, each featuring a diverse cast and two shows that have African American female leads. *Grey’s Anatomy* has a cast of African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites; *How to Get Away With Murder* has an ensemble cast of African Americans, Mexican American, Whites, and Brazilian English with Viola Davis as the lead; and *Scandal* features Kerry Washington as the lead with a cast that includes a Cuban American, African Americans, and Whites. The women in Rhimes’s dramas are authority figures with sharp minds. They can be high-handed, but it is clear that they are in charge. Because these characters “flout ingrained television conventions and preconceived notions about the depiction of diversity,” *New York Times* critic Alessandra

Photo 7.1 A family represented as Taiwanese in *Fresh Off the Boat*.



Source: © ABC

Stanley (2014), wrote, “even when her [Shonda Rhimes] heroine is the only nonwhite person in the room, it is the last thing she or anyone else around her notices or cares about” (pp. 1–2).

Rhimes is among writers and creators who still constitute a minority in television production. A study by the UCLA Ralph Bunche Center for African-American Studies of 1,061 television programs and 62 cable networks found that among creators of broadcast comedies and dramas, “minorities were underrepresented by a factor of nine to one, and on cable, the ratio was five to one . . . a minority presence on writing staffs, among directors and at talent agencies, the data was similarly disproportionate” (Rosenblum, 2014). The study also noted that “TV programs with diverse casts deliver higher ratings.” This has been noted, for the 2014–15 TV season brought not only more diversity on the screen, but also an all-African American situation comedy, *Black-ish*, produced by and starring Anthony Anderson. *Black-ish* is about a successful father trying to ensure that his children do not forget their heritage. *Empire* is a hip-hop drama created by Lee Daniels and Danny Strong, director of the films *Precious* and *The Butler*, starring Terrence Howard, Taraji P. Henson, and a largely African American cast. Based on Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, *Empire* is about a father who must decide which of his sons, one who is a gifted musician, one who is knowledgeable about business, and one who is talented and gay, will inherit his music business, Empire Enterprises. The show has a very popular soundtrack and ranks high with Twitter

users. *Empire's* March 19, 2015, finale not only drew in 16.7 million viewers, it also prompted 2.4 million Twitter posts (Koblin, 2015).

Yet there are many observers who insist that racial, ethnic, and gender “otherness” persists on television news reporting—where members of minority groups are frequently linked to crime and drugs. *Empire's* “racial dynamics,” according to Lily Rothman (2015), writing for *Time*, “have angered some viewers, who accuse it of retrograde representation of blacks. What’s the good of creating a place for African-American actors if you’re just going to ask them to play rappers and gangsters?” (p. 108). Herman S. Gray, author of *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, has a different perspective, as quoted in Rothman’s article,

This year’s overall trend toward diversity on television is a social good that has recently begun to benefit networks’ bottom line. . . . Viewers who are interested in minority perspectives and communities can turn to cable and web video, increasing pressure on broadcast networks to diversify. (p. 108)

Furthermore, Rothman adds, “In January, an Associated Press study found that three of the broadcast networks, including Fox, employ prime-time casts that are at least as black as the general population” (p. 108).

Photo 7.2 *Black-ish* is about an African American family in which the successful father does not want his children to forget their heritage.



Source: © ABC

Photo 7.3 Based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Empire* is about a father who must decide who will inherit his music business.



Source: © FOX

Sexuality as portrayed on television also has changed with gay and lesbian characters in recurring roles in drama, situation-comedies, reality shows, and animated television. *Ellen* had the first openly gay lead when Ellen DeGeneres's character Ellen Morgan announced that she was gay on her show 3 years after the show began in 1994. Homer Simpson grappled with homophobia only to reject bigotry and embrace sexual pluralism and equality in "Homer's Phobia" on *The Simpsons*. In 2014, HBO presented *The Normal Heart*, based on a 1985 play by Larry Kramer about the lives of gay men and the onset of HIV/AIDS in America. Fred Fejes (2003) pointed out that gays and lesbians are attractive to advertisers because of their consumption habits. Although gay and lesbian income is not greater than that of the general population, a 1994 study found that gays and lesbians were seen as far more likely to spend their money on new products. "To advertisers," said Fejes, "they were a very desirable group of innovative consumers" (pp. 215–216). Transgenders have also become regulars on television—especially on the soap operas and comedies. Amazon's *Transparent*, starring Jeffrey Tambor, won the Golden Globe in January 2015 and became the first digital streaming service to win for a best television series. *Trans* (pause) *parent* is about a parent's gender transition and the impact on his family. Jill Soloway, creator, executive producer, writer, and director, based the show on her own father's experience of transitioning to a woman in middle-age, and turned the production for the cast,

crew, and staff into a supportive environment for transgender people. She hired many of the cast and crew from the transgender community, including 15 actors with speaking roles, 60 extras, and ten others including a writer, camera operator, and wardrobe staffer (Farmer, 2014, p. 10).

Women's roles on television have progressed from the homemakers of the 1950s shows such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*, where women characters such as Margaret Anderson and June Cleaver represented idealized and happy submersions into domestic life where they served others and deferred to their husbands. Today, women are featured protagonists in television narratives as detectives, doctors, executives, lawyers, judges, astronauts, prisoners, spies, FBI agents, U.S. senators, a secretary of state, a vice president, and action heroines. NBC featured promotions on television called "Women Crush Wednesdays" focusing on Mariska Hargitay in *Law and Order: SVU*, Sophia Bush in *Chicago PD*, and Debra Messing in *The Mysteries of Laura*. CBS has an all-female sports talk show, *We Need to Talk*, the first of its kind. It includes CBS Sports announcers and former athletes plus guests—all women. CBS Sports president David Berson said, "I think it's long overdue" (AP, 2014).

Photo 7.4 Sophia Bush plays an officer who is equal to and as competent as her fellow intelligence officers in the police force in *Chicago PD*.



Source: © NBC

It would seem that there has been much progress given women's absence in such roles in the past. However, as mentioned earlier in this book, most actresses who play women characters and women in nonfiction roles such as news anchors and entertainment hosts are young, very beautiful, and have slender and firm bodies that are considered perfect. While there are few exceptions, most fit the preferred television aesthetic. Youthful, male bodies that are buff and perfect are often featured on dramatic television shows, but this is not always the case. Leading men do not necessarily have ideal bodies. Men in nonfiction such as the news and magazine shows are often older with less-than-idealized bodies, while their female costars are very attractive. There is still a double standard for women and men on television as far as age and appearance are concerned. Campbell Brown (2014), a former CNN reporter and host of her own show, said,

A journalist's appearance gets more public attention than the stories she reports. Women are held not to a different set of standards but rather to an additional set of them: Not only are they judged on journalistic excellence, perseverance and an ability to beat the competition. They—we—are also rated on looks, age, hair and clothes. (p. C14)

What about the representation of middle-aged and senior citizen characters? Commercial television is sponsored by advertising that appeals to 18- to 49-year-olds but courts 18- to 34-year-olds more aggressively. That is why most of the lead characters in a comedy or drama tend to be 20 to 30 years old. There are many female stars in their early 50s, but 50 is no longer considered "old." As the saying goes, 50 is the new 30.

Marketers like Kellogg's, Skechers, Dove, and 5-Hour Energy Drink have broadened their focus in television commercials to appeal to viewers 55-years-old and up, and pharmaceutical advertisements target senior citizens.

What about the representation of class? Most television dramas feature middle- and upper-class groups. When lower classes are represented on situation comedies, they are often portrayed as unintelligent buffoons, especially lower-class men. What about the disabled? How often are people represented as wheelchair-bound or physically or mentally impaired? David Hall, a double amputee, has played the role of coroner on *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* for 11 years; Marlee Matlin, who is deaf and communicates with sign language, has frequent guest roles on television and is on with Katie Leclerc and Ryan Lane who use sign language on *Switched at Birth*, an ABC Family show that merges the hearing and deaf worlds; Russell Harvard, a deaf actor who uses sign language, plays a hit man on *Fargo*; and *South Park* and *Family Guy* have Timmy in a wheelchair, Jimmy who stutters, and Joe, also in a wheelchair. *Pushgirls* is a reality show that follows a group of paraplegic women as they go about their daily lives. It appears that disabled characters on television appear more frequently than before, although the wheelchair and sign language, perhaps because of their visibility, seem to be used most often to indicate a disability. Noah Galloway, an Afghanistan veteran who lost an arm and leg in combat, was a finalist on *Dancing With the Stars*. Despite his loss of limbs, he amazed the judges with his dancing.

Photo 7.5 Noah Galloway and his professional-dance partner in *Dancing With the Stars*.

Source: © ABC

ADVICE FOR TELEVISION CRITICS

When we ask questions about representation of gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, race, and class, we have to be careful that we are not representing these various groups as the “other.” African American is a category used to describe people in America who are descendents of Africans, but what term do we use for people from Haiti or the Caribbean who have dark skin? Asian American is a large and meaningless compilation to represent Koreans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and so on. Hispanic can mean anything from Mexican to countries in Latin America. Darnell M. Hunt (2005), in his book *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, explains that race does not exist in nature, but rather the idea of race was historically developed; it is social representation,

a mental framework that works to order the way we see the world before us. We notice otherwise arbitrary differences on the surface of the human body and imbue these differences with social meaning. . . . Key cultural forums like television today play a crucial role in this ongoing meaning-making process. . . . Much of this meaning-making activity is wrapped up in our own ongoing efforts to establish who we are, who we are not, and who we hope to be. (p. 3)

As a television critic, pay attention to individual casting, the character's personality, and the narrative. Race, gender, age, and so on may not be the most important factors. For example, *Grey's Anatomy* features an interracial couple with the doctors Owen Hunt, who is White, and Cristina Yang, a Korean American, but there is nothing in the show that addresses their racial backgrounds. Olivia Pope in *Scandal* is an African American who has an affair with the married President Fitzgerald, who is White, and with Jake, who is also White, but nothing addresses their respective races in the narrative. What matters is the story and the interaction among the characters.

As a television critic, you will do more than count categories, although it is important to ask who is represented and who is not. Who is invisible? For example, how often are Native Americans represented on television? How are Muslims represented?

It is important to see how a person is represented and scrutinize whether that representation is stereotypical, fixing the meanings that are given to groups. Are professional people in business and government represented as suspicious? Are Middle Easterners represented as terrorists? Even when groups are represented in quantity on television, such as women are today, many are cast in specific roles that visually focus attention upon their sexual attractiveness. Many female actresses playing professional women wear low-cut tank tops and tight slacks that accentuate their bodies. Male actors often have to work out in strenuous fitness exercise to have toned bodies. Medical and empirical evidence

Photo 7.6 Characters President Fitzgerald and Olivia Pope, a racially mixed couple in *Scandal*.



Source: © ABC

indicates that the media play a strong role in conditioning women and men to adopt these idealized body shapes with possible harmful consequences (Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

As a television critic, you look for the visual encoding of men and women on television, whether they are in fiction or nonfiction roles. Also, you will examine the discourse to determine elements of power between and among group representations. As a critic of television, you will ask, What is at stake in a representation? How are we limited in our ways of seeing? Is there meaning that is different from what we expected to find in a representation?

Representation is a construction with a preferred meaning on the part of the encoder (the production staff), but, as we saw in Chapter 6, audience members can derive different meanings by negotiating or resisting the dominant meaning. As a television critic, you can play with meanings and discover what possibilities are there. It is important to remember that television production and distribution is a business, thus the representations may reinforce the identities of the consumer market. This is why representation is so complex. It has both artistic and economic goals.

Stuart Hall et al. (2013) suggests that representation is not static. New patterns work with and upon culture's deeper structures. There has been an increase

in the volume, range and normalization of racialized representation. . . . There has been a kind of multi-cultural drift [that] alerts us to the fact that change has taken place alongside the persistence of older patterns of racialized representation. (p. 269)

REPRESENTATION AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

As anthropologist Gregory Bateson said, human memory is a social and cultural process: "We take image production to be the locus of heightened interplay of mnemonic process and cultural formation" (Kuchler & Melion, 1991, p. 4). If memory is culturally constructed, then memory operates through representation. Certainly, our memory comes from our own nonmediated and mediated experiences, but there is also a continuum of representations and dramatic conventions that are included in our memories. Jefferson A. Singer and Peter Salovey (1993), writing about how a person remembers the past, related past memories to present representations:

Representative images crystallize characteristic interests, motives, or concerns of an individual into a shorthand moment. . . . [Memories] have collapsed a sequence of associated experiences into a single one. By focusing on the one representative memory, one gains access, whether implicitly or explicitly, to an extensive series of related memories. Individuals may open a memory bank with a snapshot, a song, a story, or a film. (p. 63)

Collective memory is a memory that different persons, unknown to one another, remember of the same event. Societies share collective or public memories with ceremonies, rituals, and television images. Television delivers and creates history through representation in

news and drama. Television is an external vessel of recollection, for it delivers and creates history as news. This creates a collective memory whereby we have shared representations of, for example, the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, the astronauts' walk on the moon, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Holocaust, the mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb, the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the war in Vietnam (the first "television war"), the collapse of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the *Challenger* explosion, the Persian Gulf War, and the fall of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. This is a major means for new generations to "know" history. George Lipsitz (1990) wrote, "Time, history, and memory become qualitatively different concepts in a world where electronic mass communication is possible" (p. 21). Television also creates history with docudramas, delivering historical events and persons through fictional representations of them. What if the docudrama distorts history? A television critic can reveal such distortions in order that people may realize that what they have seen is not necessarily the way it was. On the other hand, the television critic should also ask what the limits are of fictionalized history and artistic license.

People may have a memory but be unsure of its source. They may know it was not from direct experience but are unsure if it was from television news, a newspaper, magazine, or from another person. David Marc (1984) spoke of a shadow memory of "a continuing electronic paratext to experience [that] interacts with individual memory" (p. 135). Anthropologist Edmund Carpenter (1974) wrote that "television gives us a sense of reliving the past, of knowing the outcome even when we haven't seen the movie" (p. 16). Representation in its many forms provides us with memory, but it is important to remember that representation is dependent upon individual interpretation and assigned meaning to form memory.

SUMMARY

This chapter has explored the meaning of the concept of representation. Representation cannot duplicate reality, only imitate it, attempt to substitute, or to provoke other stored representations that already reside in a person's memory. Recognition of this enables us to understand that representation is an imitation, never the real thing. Further, there are varying reasons why we need representation. Representations provide us with access to the past, satisfy our need to know what life is like for other people, enable us to live vicariously, fulfill a daily habit, and remind us that life may have been more or less complicated in another time. Finally, they are included in our individual and collective memories. These explanations help us understand the connections between encoded representations and the decoded reception of them. Sorting out these matters is important to you as a television critic, but it is also important for public consumers of representations to know what it is they are consuming, how it is that they are consumed, and how representations intermix with personal memories to create illusions that are a "real" part of our lives. Representation is not just about who is represented, but it is also about who is not represented. Representation is about how people, places, and objects are re-presented on television and the meaning that is endowed in them. Representation of people may be emblematic of a dominant

meaning, but it is important to ask what is at stake in the representation. The more we understand about representations, their rationale, and their interpretations, the more we can effectively assess how they work and learn what their impact is on us.

EXERCISES

1. Select a television representation of a person from a country you have never visited or know little about. What is your impression of the person regarding national characteristics? Do you generalize that the person represents other citizens of the same country?
2. The term *polysemy* denotes many meanings. Watch a television show with a friend who has a different background and beliefs than your own. Afterward, discuss the meanings your friend made from the program and compare them with your own.
3. Select an example of background music, a song's lyrics, or sound in a drama. Within the context of the narrative, describe what you think it means.
4. What does the term *other* mean to you? Find and describe an example of an "other" in a television show.
5. Watch four hours of prime-time television on a weeknight (or daytime soap operas and talk shows) and identify the following:
 - a. Who are the African American characters and what are their roles or positions?
 - b. Who are the Hispanic Americans and what are their roles or positions?
 - c. Who are the Asian Americans and what are their roles or positions?
 - d. Who are the Middle Easterners and what are their roles or positions? Are any of the characters identified as Muslim?

Next, ask if their country of origin is identified (for example, Korea in the case of Asian Americans or Mexico in the case of Hispanic Americans). Are there ways that their race or ethnicity is important to the narrative? If so, describe the ways.

What racial and ethnic group do you belong to? How is your group represented on television? Does it affect you and your sense of identity?

6. Examine the roles of women on fiction and nonfiction television. Are any of the women represented as subordinate in ability to men? Are any of the men represented as subordinate in ability to women? Describe those who are. In work and/or romantic relationships, guess the relative ages of the women and the men. Describe the physical characteristics of the women and the men. Are there any differences in terms of cultural standards of attractiveness?
7. Select one of your collective memories represented on television before you were born. Do you have an image of it? If so, where did it come from?

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