11 Sociological Analysis

KEY CONCEPTS

AGENCY
DRAMATURGY
EQUIPMENT FOR LIVING
FRAMES
FRAME ANALYSIS
GUILT
HIERARCHY
IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT
MEDIA FRAMES
STRUCTURE
SYMBOLIC ACTION
SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

In 2010, AMC's *The Walking Dead* became basic cable's fall breakout hit. The series, which is loosely based on Robert Kirkman's comic book series of the same name, chronicles the struggle of small-town sheriff's deputy Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln), his family, and others to stay alive following a zombie apocalypse. Each week, Grimes and the other survivors must fend off the latest ravenous horde of flesh-eating "walkers," whose bite transforms the living into the undead. Famous for its creative methods of killing zombies and its gruesome scenes of dismemberment, *The Walking Dead* has garnered substantial critical acclaim and continues, almost a decade later, to be a ratings and fandom juggernaut. In addition to being named Television Program of the Year in both 2010 and 2012 by the American Film Institute, *The Walking Dead* earned a Writers Guild of America nomination for Best New Series and a Golden Globe nomination for Best New Television Series Drama in 2011. The series' music composer, Bear McCreary, has won six Top Television Series Score awards for his work on the show, and *The Walking Dead* continues to be nominated for and win awards. The series' success is also evident in its tremendous popularity. In fact, the show's eighth season premiere drew an audience of 11 million viewers, making it one of the most watched season premiers in the show's history.[1] *The Walking Dead* has been so successful that in 2015 it spun off a companion series and prequel, *Fear The Walking Dead*, which was renewed for a fifth season in July 2018.

The critical and commercial success of *The Walking Dead* is hardly surprising when one considers the recent string of popular films that also story zombie

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outbreaks, such as *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), *I Am Legend* (2007), *28 Weeks Later* (2007), *Zombieland* (2009), *The Dead* (2010), *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (2010), *ParaNorman* (2012), *Warm Bodies* (2013), *World War Z* (2013), and even a spirited though perhaps literarily lacking spoof on the classic Austen novel, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2016). Nor is a fascination with zombies a new phenomenon. Zombies have been capturing the imagination of American audiences since their 1932 appearance on film in *White Zombie*. But zombies have not always been depicted in the same way, and it was not until the late 1950s that they became the insatiable consumers of human flesh we all know and love today.[2] So, what is it about these brain-dead, putrid-smelling, rotting corpses that audiences find so compelling time and time again? One answer, suggested by Doug Gross in an article for CNN, is that zombies "are so darned versatile – helping reflect whatever our greatest fears happen to be at the time."[3] In other words, zombies are a particularly useful vehicle for symbolic action; they are empty vessels that society can pour its deepest anxieties and fears into, and whose destruction will aid in assuaging those fears. At various historical junctures, zombies have symbolically assisted audiences in confronting everything from their anxieties around forced labor to their concerns about conspicuous consumption.

Zombie stories are, of course, but one example of the countless ways that audiences negotiate the challenges, difficulties, and demands of everyday life through the meanings they assign, if only unconsciously, to the images and messages that circulate widely in the media. The repeating theme of incompetent, egocentric, or overly demanding bosses in workplace comedies on television (*The Office*, *30 Rock*, *Scrubs*, *Superstore* etc.) and in theaters (*Office Space*, *In Good Company*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Horrible Bosses*, and, arguably, *The Intern*), for instance, assists viewers in making sense of, framing, and coping with their own workplace stresses. Being able to identify recurrent patterns in media and how they influence the interactions of people lies at the heart of "sociological criticism."[4] In many ways, this approach extends the Reception approach discussed in the previous chapter. But, in addition to trying to understand how audiences assign meanings to messages, Sociological analysis also seeks to understand how they take up those meanings in their daily lives. To clarify this approach, this chapter locates the roots of Sociological analysis in the perspective of symbolic interactionism, before exploring three contemporary methods of engaging in Sociological analysis: dramaturgy, frame analysis, and equipment for living.

Sociological Theory: An Overview

The theoretical basis for Sociological criticism of the mass media is rooted in the perspective of **symbolic interactionism**, which suggests that the character and conduct of people's social interactions are powerfully shaped by the symbolic meanings they assign to objects, events, other people, and social contexts. This perspective was heavily influenced by the work of the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) and the American sociologist George Herbert Mead

(1863–1931), both of whom emphasized that individuals act in accordance with their interpretation of the world – their subjective meanings of the world – and not necessarily the world as it objectively exists. But it was a student of Mead's at the University of Chicago, Herbert Blumer (1900–87), who actually coined the phrase "symbolic interactionism" and explicitly laid out its central tenets. In his 1969 book, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Blumer outlined the three core premises of this theory.

According to Blumer, "The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that they have for them."[5] While this seems simple and straightforward, Blumer suggests that it is often ignored, downplayed, or taken for granted in studies of human behavior. Scholars too often ignore that everything in the world – physical objects, persons, categories, ideals, institutions, activities, events, etc. – carries meaning for humans and, thus, shapes their attitudes and actions. For Blumer, meaning is not only central to all human behavior, but is also complex. This leads to his second premise, the idea that meaning is "derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows." Meaning, in other words, is rarely simple, neutral, self-evident, and uncontested. Rather, it is contingent and contextual; meaning is negotiated through interactions with others, as well as with social institutions like education, religion, and the media. The third premise of symbolic interactionism is "that these meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he [sic] encounters." With this premise, Blumer is pointing to the individual as well as the collective character of meaning. Interpretation, in other words, is not "a mere automatic application of established meanings" but a formative process in which each person revises meaning as a guide for action based upon individual experiences and the particular context.[6]

Symbolic interactionism seeks, then, to understand and explain how persons interact with one another in society. Since interactionists do this by attending to and analyzing patterns of communication and behavior in relation to specific contexts or aspects of social life rather than by examining broad-scale social systems and structures, it is regarded as a micro- rather than macro-level perspective. Historically, interactionism has employed qualitative methods (primarily participant observation and interpretive analysis) as opposed to quantitative methods (empirical analysis) in the execution of its work. It should be noted that as initially formulated, symbolic interactionism was, strictly speaking, a social theory and not a media theory. But, as media have come to occupy a more central role in society, the premises of symbolic interactionism have been extended, adapted, and modified – as well as challenged – by critical media scholars to help account for the role that media play in our social lives. In the remainder of this chapter, we outline three contemporary perspectives that draw in varying degrees and ways on the tradition of symbolic interactionism to explicate how our interactions with media influence and shape human behavior.

Before turning to our first perspective, dramaturgy, we wish to say a few words about the twin concepts of agency and structure. In sociological literature, (individual) **agency** describes the capacity of human beings to act purposively and according to their own volitions, while (institutional) **structure** refers to any social feature or force that constrains or limits agency. These two concepts, which exist in dialectical tension with one another, are useful for thinking about the relationship between media audiences and media texts. While media audiences exercise agency in both the interpretation and the use of media, media texts impose structures that limit how audiences can reasonably interpret and use them. This tension will arise in varying ratios throughout this chapter. While dramaturgy places a great deal of emphasis on individual agency, framing focuses more on structures that limit audience understandings and practices. So, while we have placed this chapter in the section of the book concerned with audiences, our readers should not lose sight of the fact that audiences are always constrained to some extent by the structured invitations of the media texts with which they interact.

Dramaturgy

One contemporary microsociological perspective that is useful in understanding the ways in which media shape human behavior is **dramaturgy**. Dramaturgy is a theory developed by the Canadian-born sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–82) that utilizes the metaphor of theater to explain the character and function of public behavior, especially face-to-face interaction. The foundational assumption of dramaturgy, which Goffman lays out in his 1959 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, is that the self – our sense of who we are – is not a stable, independent entity, but a performed character we are endlessly staging and restaging in the presence of others.[7] Generally speaking, we care about how others perceive us because their perceptions contribute to our own sense of who we are. Identity, in other words, is not inherent or innate, but a product that emerges through social interaction. It would be difficult to regard yourself as an intelligent person, for instance, if others routinely informed you that you were stupid. If someone deeply desires to be perceived as intelligent, she or he will publicly perform "intelligence." Such a performance will involve a host of theatrical devices involving setting, props, costumes, characters, scripted dialog, and so on. For example, a person performing intelligence might regularly go to coffee shops, read books, wear reading glasses and a scarf (in the summer!), hang out with others who are perceived as intelligent, and say things like, "I am unconvinced by Derrida's assertion that there is no outside to textuality." Since reading is a solitary activity, when one chooses to read in public, and especially when one chooses to read Derrida in public, one is performing for an audience.

A dramaturgical perspective, then, understands social interactions as performances aimed at impression management. For Goffman, **impression management** is the art of successfully staging a character or "part," of enacting a performance that creates the desired impression of the self – "an idealized self that fits appropriately into the requirements of the context."[8] Like all theatrical

performances, performances of the self entail certain dramatic elements, such as stage, setting (or scene), part (or character), and team (or players). Before discussing these elements, we wish to note that this is not a comprehensive list. For Goffman, "a 'performance' may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants."[9] Given the breadth of this definition, virtually any aspect of social life could be treated in terms of the theatrical metaphor. But we will concentrate on those that we think are most helpful to media scholars.

1 *Stage* describes a performance's degree of publicness. Goffman distinguishes between the two primary regions in this regard: front stage and back stage. Front stage refers to those performances that occur in full view of an audience, while back stage refers to a place reserved only for the performer. This distinction is significant because behavior varies greatly depending upon whether or not there is an audience. Since the back stage affords performers a safe place to step out of character, people do many things in private or back stage that they would never do in public or front stage. There are few things that disrupt the performance of self more than an audience member suddenly and unexpectedly gaining access to back stage, as anyone who has been caught with their pants down will tell you.
2 *Setting* refers to the scene or situation in which the performance is occurring. For Goffman, the setting includes everything from the actual physical location in which a social interaction takes place to the accoutrements and features of that location, such as furniture, décor, physical layout, and so on. Because settings are so closely connected to performances, audiences are likely to reject performances that appear to be out of place. You would be unlikely to follow a professor's direction to take your seat and turn to page 34 of your textbook while in the checkout line at the grocery store. Settings or situations, in other words, are never neutral. When we enter a particular setting, we have been socialized to expect and abide by certain rules, rituals, and practices. Behaviors that are acceptable in a dance club would likely get one kicked out of a library, if not arrested. So, settings place powerful limits and constraints on performances of self. Such constraints are often unspoken and unwritten. There are, for instance, implicit codes of accepted behavior in restrooms. While it is acceptable for a man to continue a conversation with someone at a urinal if he entered the restroom with that person, starting up a conversation at the urinal with someone who was already there is generally frowned upon.
3 *Part*, or what Goffman calls "personal front," describes the pattern of actions that define the character being performed. When playing a part, a performer typically tries to convey a particular image of her- or himself through "appearance" (attire, sex, age, race, etc.) and "manner" (speech, gestures, posture, expressions, temperament, etc.). Obviously, some of these elements are more fixed than others, making it more difficult for some people to play certain parts. It would be almost impossible for a 12-year-old to convincingly perform the part of a medical doctor, for instance. For Goffman, appearance informs the audience of things like a performer's social status and current ritual state (i.e., whether the actor is engaged in a social, work-related, or informal activity), while manner highlights the interaction role the performer is likely to play (i.e., whether the actor is expected to be meek, assertive, friendly, standoffish, reserved, outgoing, etc.).[10] Thus, like settings, parts carry heavy social expectations, though the expectations are with regard to ritual and role performances. For example, audiences expect someone playing the part of flight attendant to wear a uniform and to be courteous, attentive, and reassuring. Imagine how shocking – which is to say, inappropriate – it would be if you asked a flight attendant for a beverage and were sharply told, "Get it yourself!"
4 *Team* takes into account the troupe of players who share in a performance. While we tend to think about performances of self in individual terms, most performances rely upon a cast of supporting characters. "A team," writes Goffman, "may be defined as a set of individuals whose intimate co-operation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained."[11] The flight attendant, for example, is only able to successfully perform that part in the context of a setting where others are performing roles that complement, support, or reinforce it. Flight attendants rely on pilots, gate agents, baggage movers, air traffic controllers, and a host of others to compellingly perform their parts. Imagine a scenario in which a key member of a team is absent. How would you respond to a flight attendant who, even if dressed professionally and behaving courteously, calmly asked you to turn off your electronic devices and fasten your seatbelt low and tight around your waist in preparation for takeoff in an airplane that had no pilot? Without appropriate team support, such a performance would likely cause alarm rather than comfort. Moreover, given the reciprocal importance of teammates to the success of a public performance, any member of a team can give away the performance through inappropriate conduct.

Having discussed the dramatic elements of stage, setting, part, and team, it is not difficult to see the utility of a dramaturgical approach to the study of human interaction in online environments, especially with regard to social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Behavior on Facebook offers an excellent example of the explanatory power of dramaturgy, since everything a user does (or does not do!) is about impression management. Profile pages, whether one's own or someone else's, constitute the front stage, while private inboxes are more analogous to the back stage. Through the actions of friending (and unfriending), posting, liking, tagging, and joining groups, Facebook users create carefully constructed impressions. They selectively post and tag themselves in images, "like" comments and other postings that reflect their sense of themselves, and favorite books, movies, and so on with which they want to be associated. Meanwhile, on Facebook, one's "friends" serve as the audience for one's performance. We have inscribed "friends" in quotation marks to highlight the fact that many people in one's friend circle are not actually friends; they may be casual acquaintances, former romantic partners, or

professional colleagues, but they are not, in fact, friends. A user's actual friends are part of the team performance, which is why a user may delete a wall posting from someone they do not regard as part of the team. On occasion, users also disavow the performances of teammates by untagging themselves from photographs they deem as unflattering and deleting wall postings they regard as inappropriate. Facebook, then, is largely a self-serving performance, which explains why research on social networking sites indicates that users with a large number of friends (a large audience) and frequent self-focused posts and photos (frequent performances) tend to be narcissists.[12]

As useful as dramaturgy is to understanding the dynamics of social networking sites, we are more interested in its capacity to help explain, first, why performers play some parts "in the manner" that they do and, second, why some performers are readily accepted playing some parts and not others. With regard to the former issue, we turn to the matter of romantic relationships. Given the transactional nature of identity, romantic relationships play a crucial role in our sense of self. But where do we learn what to expect out of romantic relationships and how to behave in them? According to Mary-Lou Galician, "From the time we're very young, we're barraged with fairy-tale depictions and hard-to-break stereotypes of sex, love, and romance in … popular culture … Mass media are very powerful socialization agents that rely on simplification, distortions of reality, and dramatic symbols and stereotypes to communicate their messages."[13] Galician underscores 12 myths perpetuated by the media that lead to dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and unrealistic expectations in romantic couplings, and sometimes even to "serious emotional and physical harm from depression, abuse, and violence."[14] Several of these include

> Your perfect partner is cosmically predestined, so nothing/nobody can ultimately separate you.
> If your partner is truly meant for you, sex is easy and wonderful.
> The love of a good and faithful woman can change a man from a "beast" into a "prince."
> Bickering and fighting a lot mean that a man and a woman really love each other passionately.
> All you really need is love, so it doesn't matter if you and your lover have very different values.[15]

In just 2017, these and the other romantic myths identified by Galician were perpetuated in films such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *Fifty Shades Darker*, *Phantom Thread*, *Baywatch*, and *Everything, Everything*, as well as in the lyrics and music videos for Lanco's "Greatest Love Story," Ed Sheeran's "The Shape of You," Selena Gomez's "Back to You," and Brett Young's "In Case You Don't Know."[16]

In addition to contributing to our understanding of how the media impact our performance of roles and rituals in romantic relations, a dramaturgical perspective can also shed light on why society judges certain performances the way it does. While any number of examples could be used to illustrate this point, we briefly consider televisual representations of motherhood. The image of ideal motherhood has evolved significantly over the history of television. In the 1950s, *Leave It to Beaver* imagined June Cleaver, with her perfectly coiffed hair and well-accessorized dresses while cooking in the kitchen, as the ideal mom. By the 1970s, an audience favorite like Carol Brady on *The Brady Bunch*, while still confined to the home, was aided by a fulltime housekeeper. Then, in the 1980s, the intelligent and eloquent Clair Huxtable set a new standard for mothers with her job as a lawyer on *The Cosby Show*, though viewers never actually saw her at work. More recently, the *Gilmore Girls*' Lorelai Gilmore has been rated highly on several lists of top TV moms for her ability to strike a careful work–life balance as a single mother. Despite their changing social roles around work and the home over the decades, what each of these highly rated TV moms embodies are the traits of ideal femininity; they are calm, composed, nurturing, sensitive, domestic, and above all attractive.

If there is any question about the deeply embedded cultural values linking ideal motherhood to ideal femininity on television, one need look no further than to lists of TV's worst moms, which include characters like *Roseanne's* Roseanne Conner (who has recently fallen from social grace after her actress' personal behavior too closely mirrored her character's), *Married… With Children's* Peg Bundy, *Everybody Loves Raymond's* Marie Barone, and *Malcolm in the Middle's* Lois. What these women share in common are a series of mannerisms: they are loud, bossy, caustic, obnoxious, overbearing, manipulative, inattentive, nagging, narcissistic, crazy, lazy, and just generally unfeminine. Given that these lists of TV's best and worst moms were created by critics and viewers, it appears that audiences have unconsciously internalized the belief that ideal moms must also embody ideal femininity. As we hope this example illustrates, dramaturgy can be a useful tool for media scholars who wish to critically assess why we value some performances and devalue others.

Frame Analysis

A second approach to emerge out of the microsociological tradition and its concern with everyday life is frame analysis. As with dramaturgy, frame analysis owes a major debt to the work of Erving Goffman, whose 1974 book, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, was central to its development. But, in contrast to dramaturgy, frame analysis is more properly understood as a "structuralist" approach than as an "interactionist" one. Whereas an interactionist approach is concerned with close observation of the particularities of the situations that make up everyday life, a structuralist approach emphasizes the more abstract forms and modes that govern – which is to say, structure – those situations.[17] This shift in emphasis is detectable in Goffman's description of **frames** as social constructs that organize our experience and, thus, our understanding of a situation based upon how they name or define it. Accordingly, **frame analysis** is, for Goffman, an examination of "the organization of experience."[18]

To appreciate the explanatory force of frames, it is helpful to first consider the contextual or relative character of all action and experience. The behavior of crying, for example, has no inherent stable meaning. If you were told your friend

Eddie was crying, you would not know whether he was joyful or sorrowful without more contextual information. The context would, in other words, frame your interpretation of Eddie's emotional display. This is what Goffman means when he says frames organize our experience; they aid us in interpreting or making sense of social behavior and interaction. Goffman divides the most basic of frames, which he calls primary frameworks, into two broad classes: natural and social. *Natural frameworks* describe purely physical occurrences that lie beyond human control, such as the weather or biological processes, while *social frameworks* "provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency," such as a human being.[19] Let us assume for a minute that Eddie is crying because he is sad. If Eddie were standing in front of his house, which was recently reduced to rubble by a tornado, then you would interpret his sadness principally through a natural framework. In contrast, if Eddie just ended a phone conversation in which his romantic partner terminated their relationship, you would understand his sadness in terms of a social framework or schema.

After Goffman published his account of frames, media scholars were quick to realize the utility of this concept in explaining how the media organize our experience of issues, events, and even our social world. The early work on framing in media studies concentrated almost exclusively on journalism. Building on Goffman's work, sociologist and media scholar Todd Gitlin defined **media frames** as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual."[20] In his 1980 book, *The Whole World is Watching*, Gitlin examined how the *New York Times* and CBS News covered the activities of the anti-war movement, the New Left, and in particular Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) during the 1960s and early '70s, arguing that the mainstream news media tend to "frame" oppositional movements in ways that either marginalize their messages or tame them.[21] Such framing has had the effect of blunting progressive reform and maintaining the political status quo. Among the main contributions of Gitlin's study is that it demonstrates that frames work by means of the principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation.

1 *Selection.* Frames shape our perceptions of events by including some details and excluding others. In any given situation, there are an infinite number of particulars that could be reported. But, because of the time and space restrictions that govern news reporting, as well as the desire to hold audience members' attention, consciously or not, journalists share only select details when reporting a story. Obviously, the details that are left out could significantly alter or reframe the audience's understanding of the event. Your perception of someone who is accused of murder, for instance, would almost certainly be more sympathetic if you knew that the accused was acting in self-defense in response to the burglary of her home.
2 *Emphasis.* In addition to selecting the details to be included and excluded, journalists also give more attention to certain elements in a story than to others. In other words, not all of the details included in a story are given equal weight. A reporter who spends substantially more time describing *where* a crime took place than *what* the actual crime was would likely cause the audience to perceive the location of the crime as more significant to the overall story than the crime itself. Thus, by emphasizing some elements or details and minimizing others, news frames direct audiences to draw conclusions about which aspects of an event are the most salient and important.
3 *Presentation.* Finally, there is the matter of presentation, which is probably the most subtle mechanism at work within news frames. After details of an event have been included or excluded, emphasized or de-emphasized, they are presented to the audience through the use of certain linguistic and visual symbols. But, since all symbols are value-laden, the use of one set as opposed to another alters, even if only marginally, meaning and perception, thereby communicating a different attitude toward the person or event being described. A criminal defendant who is referred to by a journalist as a "local honor student" is likely to be perceived very differently than one described as a "violent repeat offender," even if they are accused of the same crime.

The importance of the principle of presentation to framing was dramatically illustrated in a study by Kahneman and Tversky in 1984. The authors presented a focus group with the following scenario:

> Imagine that the US is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimates of the consequences of the programs are as follows: If Program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. If Program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that 600 people will be saved and a two-thirds probability that no people will be saved. Which program do you favor?[22]

In response to this scenario, 72 percent of participants selected Program A, while only 28 percent selected Program B. The researchers then presented a second focus group with the same scenario, but reframed the outcome in terms of likely deaths rather than likely lives saved:

> If Program C is adopted, 400 people will die. If Program D is adopted, there is a one-third probability that nobody will die and a two-thirds probability that 600 people will die.[23]

Though the outcomes of Programs C and A are *identical*, as are the outcomes of Programs B and D, in the revised scenario only 22 percent of the participants selected C (compared with 72 percent who opted for A), while 78 percent of participants selected D (compared with 28 percent who opted for B). By changing how the two programs were *presented*, Kahneman and Tversky demonstrated that framing can powerfully influence both audience perception and decision-making.

Since these early studies, scholars have continued to examine and expand upon the notion of framing in the news media. Reflecting on the state of framing research in 1993, Robert Entman concluded that, based upon the guiding principles of *selection* and *salience* (salience essentially combines Gitlin's principles of emphasis and presentation), frames perform four primary functions: (1) naming and defining a problem in a particular way, (2) diagnosing and characterizing the principal causes of the problem, (3) making moral judgments about the actors or agents involved, and (4) offering specific recommendations or remedies.[24] It should be noted that Entman's use of the word "problem" may itself be problematic, since frames define situations in ways other than as problems. More recent scholarship on the subject of framing suggests that studies of news framing generally fall into one of two categories: *issue-specific news frames* and *generic news frames*.[25] Studies of issue-specific news frames focus on identifying frames that are unique to a particular story or context, while generic news frames seek to identify recurring frames that, as a consequence of news conventions (see the discussion of informational bias in Chapter 3), extend across stories.

One important study to examine generic news frames was Ott and Aoki's analysis of news media coverage and framing of public traumas. Taking the print media's coverage (from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*) of the Matthew Shepard murder as their case study, the authors explore the narrative pattern of victimage or scapegoating in ongoing news reports surrounding shocking public events. According to Ott and Aoki, when a public tragedy such as a school shooting first occurs, news reports commonly invite audiences to reflect on social problems, such as inadequate gun control laws, that may have contributed to the disaster. But as the story unfolds, blame is affixed to a specific party (scapegoat), who is then demonized and dehumanized. When the scapegoat is ultimately punished, it promotes a sense of psychological resolution regarding the issue, and the public policy reforms discussed immediately following the tragedy are rarely implemented. "Since tragic frames ultimately alleviate the social guilt associated with a disaster through victimage," Ott and Aoki conclude, "they tend to bring both closure *and* resolution to the larger social issues they raise. As such, tragic frames do not serve the public well as a basis for social and political action."[26]

Though most of the work in critical media studies involving framing has focused on the news media, the concept also has heuristic value for understanding the role of entertainment media in framing public attitudes and opinions. In his 2002 book, *Latino Images on Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance*, Charles Ramírez Berg investigates the evolving representations and meanings of aliens in science fiction (SF) films. According to Berg, SF films are inevitably about a society's fears and anxieties at a particular historical juncture. The alien invader in 1950s SF films, for instance, was a personification of the Red Menace, "those hordes of Communists foisted on the American people by such venomous Red-baiters as Joseph McCarthy, Richard Nixon, and Billy Graham."[27] SF films, like news media frames, organize our experience and understanding of a situation, who we hold responsible for it, and how we think it should be resolved.

But, by the 1970s and '80s, the SF alien had increasingly become "a figure for the alien immigrants who have been entering the country in increasing numbers for the past several decades."[28] Represented as creatures from foreign worlds, aliens had to be eliminated, either by benevolently helping them return to their home, as seen in films like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1997), *E.T.* (1982), and *Cocoon* (1985), or by violently killing them, as seen in films like *Critters* (1986), *Aliens* (1986), and *Predator* (1987). In subsequent decades, aliens have progressively been depicted as more and more menacing, as an invading force that threatens our basic freedoms and way of life. Films such as *Independence Day* (1996), *War of the Worlds* (2005), and *10 Cloverfield Lane* (2016) depict aliens who not only come to Earth (read: the United States), but who also want to annihilate us. Conveniently, the aliens in these films look less human than the benevolent aliens of earlier eras. Dehumanizing them, of course, works to Other them (see the discussion of Othering in Chapter 6) and to heighten the audience's desire to see them brutally exterminated. Because SF films frame how we see the alien Other (as welcome visitor, displaced child, less technologically advanced species, or invading force), they also implicitly suggest programs of action for dealing with them. In Berg's book, he traces how changes in US immigration policy over time tend to reflect the changing images of the alien Other in SF films. Interestingly, the 2016 film *Arrival* largely departs from these formulas, storying the efforts of linguist Louise Banks (Amy Adams) and physicist Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner) to understand and communicate with an alien species that has come to Earth. That their "talks" very nearly result in a violent encounter with the aliens, however, suggests just how little we trust those who are different than us.

Equipment for Living

A third critical approach to evaluating the complex ways in which the media assist us in comprehending, managing, and negotiating our social environment and social relations is equipment for living. The concept of **equipment for living** is based on the premise that messages – media and otherwise – provide individuals with symbolic resources for addressing and resolving the anxieties and difficulties they confront in their everyday lives. This idea was advanced by 20th-century literary scholar and philosopher Kenneth Burke (1897–1993), in an essay titled "Literature as Equipment for Living," which was originally published in the magazine *Direction* in 1938 before being republished in a collection of Burke's essays titled *The Philosophy of Literary Form* in 1941.

Burke begins his famous essay with a discussion of proverbs, noting that they are really just literary devices for naming typical, recurrent situations. A popular proverb like "birds of a feather flock together," for instance, simply names the fact that people who have common or shared tastes frequently associate with one another. But because proverbs describe recurring situations in life, they offer a means for quickly sizing up a "type" of situation and

developing a strategy to respond to it. If you attend a party at which a select group of people has congregated in one corner, then invoking the "birds" proverb under your breath provides a way of admonishing the group for having excluded you. Verbally lumping the individuals together and then disparaging them for drinking too much, behaving badly, or dressing poorly is a particularly effective way of resolving the anxiety of having been excluded. For Burke, proverbs are just succinct instances of how literature in general functions as "stylistic medicine" for everyday problems.

Thus, for Burke, various literary forms such as comedy, tragedy, satire, and elegy are themselves ways of naming recurring social situations, thereby providing readers with symbolic resources for addressing those situations in their real lives. The notion that literature or really any type of discourse functions as equipment for living is rooted in the idea of **symbolic action**, which, for Burke, "involve[s] modes of behavior made possible by the acquiring of a conventional, arbitrary symbol system."[29] Burke contrasts symbolic action, or the use of symbols by humans to act in the world, with nonsymbolic motion, by which he means the realm of matter or those natural processes that occur without human intervention. This distinction is important for Burke because it suggests that to understand human behavior, as well as human motives, we need to attend carefully to what humans *do* with symbols, to how they use them to act in the world. Sometimes, we engage in an action or behavior as a symbolic substitute for another action or behavior. "The reading of a book on the attaining of success," explains Burke, "is in itself the symbolic attaining of that success,"[30] which is why the reader is unlikely to take any actions to attain success beyond reading the book. Similarly, we may write an angry letter to a person, which we never mail, *instead* of actually confronting them. Writing the letter, nevertheless, helps us resolve our anger.

One of the reasons why literature and other art forms function as equipment for living for audiences is because producers of art create it as a means of dealing with some challenge (i.e. recurring social situation) in everyday life. Authors write books, Burke believes, as a way of "coming to terms" with – of symbolically confronting and resolving – the difficulties in their own lives. Though a prolific writer, Burke wrote only one novel, *Towards a Better Life*, in his lifetime. He wrote the book in 1931, just two years before he married Elizabeth Batterham, the sister of his first wife, Lily Mary Batterham. In the story, Burke's narrator undergoes moments of extreme discomfiture only for the theme of resurgence to be explicitly proclaimed. Perhaps aware of the symbolic connection to his own life, years later, in the 1965 preface to the second edition, Burke wrote: "Often, a closer look at … texts will make it appear that, however roundabout, they are modes of symbolic action classifiable as rituals of resurgence, transcendence, rebirth … My … study of various literary texts, viewed as modes of 'symbolic action,' has convinced me that this book is to be classed among the many rituals of rebirth that mark our fiction."[31]

One of the most common recurring situations in the human condition is guilt. According to Burke, every aspect of our lives is governed by values and rules, which he refers to as **hierarchy** or order. **Guilt** is the condition that arises

Table 11.1 Kenneth Burke's pollution–purification–redemption cycle

	Pollution	Purification	Redemption
Description	The violation of order	The purging or punishment of guilt	The restoration of purity
Symbolic act	Sin → guilt	Transcendence, mortification, or victimage	Absolution → rebirth

every time we violate hierarchy. Because we all participate in multiple hierarchies, which often have conflicting rules, it is impossible to keep all the rules all the time. Consequently, guilt is ubiquitous. Imagine the following scenario: Your best friend is celebrating her 21st birthday and wants you to join her for the festivities this evening. But you have an exam tomorrow that is worth 30 percent of your grade in a class you need to graduate. One set of rules (hierarchy) is telling you to go have fun with your friend, while another set is saying you should stay home and study. Ultimately, you will have to violate one of these hierarchies, which will cause you to feel guilty. Because guilt is profoundly disquieting and discomforting, we have developed an array of symbolic strategies for ridding ourselves of it. Burke calls this process the pollution–purification–redemption cycle (Table 11.1), and it offers three different means of addressing guilt: transcendence, mortification, and victimage.

1 *Transcendence* is not so much a way of resolving guilt as it is a way of avoiding it by appealing to a new hierarchy or third perspective in which two conflicting hierarchies cease to be in opposition.[32] Rather than celebrating with your friend, you decide to stay in and study after all. You rationalize your decision not by placing the exam ahead of your friend, an action sure to lead to guilt, but by reminding yourself that your friend values family above all else and that your family is struggling to pay your way through school. Poof: your guilt is gone.
2 *Mortification* requires a symbolic act of atonement such as confession or self-sacrifice.[33] Perhaps you decide to celebrate with your friend instead of studying for your exam, which you subsequently fail. This leads to feelings of guilt about your choice. As a means of relieving your guilt, you punish yourself by swearing off beer, your favorite beverage in the whole wide world, for an entire year. Though your abstinence lasts only 2 days, you nevertheless feel as though you have paid a heavy price and your guilt subsides. Self-flagellation is another form of atonement, though a slightly more masochistic one than confession or sacrifice.
3 *Victimage* offers a third strategy for addressing guilt, and the one that most directly concerns us as media scholars. Victimage is a form of scapegoating in which the guilty party transfers his or her guilt on to another party. To the extent that a character in a novel, television show, or film is guilty of a "sin" (i.e. any violation of hierarchy) similar to our own, that character may serve as a surrogate for our own guilt. The resolution of the character's guilt is,

through symbolic action, the resolution of our own. Scapegoating can be seen in two archetypical symbolic forms, tragedy and comedy, both of which function as equipment for living. The ways they equip us to resolve guilt vary greatly, however.

Tragedy is a form of drama in which the protagonist or tragic hero experiences a reversal of fortune as a result of some mistake or error in judgment. The tragic hero's inevitable demise, typically in the form of his or her death, serves as symbolic equipment for audiences to the extent that they identify with the hero and his or her error. Herman Melville's classic 1851 novel, *Moby Dick*, is a well-known tragedy, in which the tragic hero, Captain Ahab, dooms both himself and his crew because of his monomaniacal obsession with a whale. Most of us have, at one point or another, been obsessed with someone or something. Imagine that you are so obsessed with playing *Angry Birds* or watching reality TV, for instance, that you begin to neglect family and friends. Such actions could readily produce feelings of guilt and regret. Reading *Moby Dick* or watching a film with a character similar to Ahab, who is ultimately punished for his obsessive actions, can function symbolically to purge that guilt. In essence, Ahab's punishment vicariously serves as your punishment.

Comedy, by contrast, traces the buffoonery of its central character, the comic fool, who is reinstated into the community after being shown the error of his or her ways. In the opinion of one of the authors of this text, one of the greatest comic fools in history is Peter Griffin, the crude and dimwitted father of the Griffin family on the television show *Family Guy*. When Peter's doltish behavior inevitably causes things to go horribly awry, he must be taught his error, so that it can be corrected and he may be accepted again by his family and friends. Since most of us are not that much brighter than Peter Griffin, we frequently engage in stupid behavior that has negative consequences. If, hypothetically speaking, you recklessly drank too much alcohol one evening and then vomited on the seat of your best friend's car, you would likely feel badly about it ... at least, after you sobered up. Peter aids in resolving such guilt by reminding us that we all throw up on someone else's car seat (or couch, or bed, or pant leg) sometimes. Who among us, after all, has not done something idiotic? Watching someone else make poor choices and seeing that person corrected serves as our own admonishment to avoid errors like vomiting in the future.[34] Burke views comedy as a particularly humane way of resolving guilt, because it recognizes that "to err is human" and therefore calls for the tolerant reinstatement of the fool in society, rather than for his or her tragic punishment.[35]

Tragedy and comedy are very broad (generic) forms and can function as symbolic equipment for a wide variety of situations (types of guilt) over time. But Burke recognizes that societies continuously face social problems that are unique to particular historical moments, and therefore must continually develop new, specialized discursive forms to address them. Noting the contextual character of form, Burke writes, "the conventional forms of one age are as resolutely shunned by another."[36] Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the former Soviet Union, for instance, there was a noticeable decline in films

like *Firefox* (1982), *War Games* (1983), *The Day After* (1983), *Red Dawn* (1984), and *Threads* (1984) that addressed anxieties over mutually assured destruction. One aim of sociological criticism, then, is "to identify the modes of discourse enjoying currency in a society and to link discourse to the real situations for which it is symbolic equipment."[37]

An excellent example of this practice in critical media studies is Barry Brummett's study of haunted-house (note: not horror) films. Based upon his analysis of *The Shining* (1980), *The Amityville Horror* (1979), *The Hearse* (1980), *The Haunting* (1963), and *The Uninvited* (1944), Brummett argues that haunted-house films stage "horrors" that help us cope with real, if unconscious, horrors. Specifically, he maintains that haunted-house films help equip us to confront feelings of disorientation, the fear of the unpredictable and shocking, and the idea of death. One of the most interesting and insightful aspects of Brummett's study is that it shows that haunted-house films provide symbolic equipment for audiences at the level of medium as well as at the level of form and content.[38] Because films are typically viewed in darkened theaters, they are especially well suited for staging symbolic horrors. But the capacity of film to function as equipment for living is not limited to haunted-house films. Science fiction films, especially dystopian ones, tell stories about wide-scale social anxieties as a means of coping with those anxieties. Fear of human extinction is storied in films like *2012* (2009) and *Melancholia* (2011); concern about government repression underlies films like *Children of Men* (2006), *The Hunger Games* (2012), and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017); and technophobia is at the heart of blockbusters like *I, Robot* (2004), *Avatar* (2009), and the Netflix show *Black Mirror*.

To date, the most sustained study of how media function as equipment for living is Brian Ott's 2007 book, *The Small Screen*. Ott is interested in how people cope with fundamental social change, the kind of change that only occurs following a major technological and/or economic revolution. So, he explores prime-time television programming in the United States during the 1990s, charting the symbolic resources it offers viewers for negotiating the transition from a primarily industrial-based society to a primarily information-based one. In his study, Ott identifies two major symbolic forms that dominated the televisual landscape during that time: *hyperconscious* and *nostalgia* television. Hyperconscious television is typified by the conventions of eclecticism, intertextuality, and self-reflexivity, while nostalgia television is defined by the elements of purity, unity, and security. *The Simpsons* is an archetype of the former symbolic form, while *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* is an exemplar of the latter. Ott then explores the very different sets of symbolic resources that these two forms offered viewers for confronting and managing the particular social anxieties – such as information overload, identify drift, acceleration, and fragmentation – associated with the rise of the Information Age.[39] In several subsequent studies, Ott has continued to demonstrate how evolving forms of media equip viewers with symbolic resources to deal with paradigmatic social change.[40]

Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, we have highlighted a few of the ways that audiences not only assign meanings to media texts, but also employ those meanings in the conduct of their daily lives. The first perspective we discussed, dramaturgy, looked at life through the metaphor of theater, exploring both how persons increasingly perform their sense of self in online contexts such as Facebook and how performances of self, whether online or not, are constrained by the social roles and rituals presented in and reinforced by the mass media. The second perspective, framing, pointed to the manner in which news and entertainment media organize our experience of issues, events, and social contexts. It suggested that how situations are framed in the media can play a powerful role in our perceptions of them, our subsequent attitudes toward them, and finally what we regard as appropriate and inappropriate future action. Equipment for living, the third and final perspective, considered how audiences use media to symbolically confront, negotiate, and resolve the trials and tribulations they face in their personal, professional, and public lives. In sum, all three perspectives help to illuminate how our interactions with media actively contribute to the production of everyday life.

MEDIA LAB 10: DOING SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

OBJECTIVE

The chief aim of this lab is to affirm the principles of Media Ecology by furnishing students with an opportunity to examine the symbolic equipment of a media text and the features and logics of a specific medium.

ACTIVITY

- Divide the class into groups of 4–5 students.
- Equipment for Living: show the *South Park* episode, "Over Logging," and then ask students to answer the following questions:
  1. What social anxiety does this episode stage?
  2. Who is the comic fool and how is he shown the error of his ways?
  3. What symbolic resources does the episode provide for confronting the social anxiety it stages?

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