

Critical Media Analysis Assignment¹

Roland Barthes provides a useful distinction between natural behaviour and culturally-specific behaviour:

“It’s certainly natural to eat, to sleep, to make love and to use language. But *what* we eat, *when* we sleep, *how* we make love and what kind of *words* we use varies according to the society and class to which we belong.” -- Roland Barthes

All cultures develop mythologies over time that rationalize or justify their culturally-specific social practices as if they were natural behaviours, beliefs, or value systems. Cultural myths usually take the form of strong assertions that profess to be self-evident such as

1. The national debt is the greatest danger to the country.
2. Women are naturally maternal.
3. If you don’t get into university, your adult life will be unbearable, unfulfilling, and poverty-stricken.
4. Animals exist to provide food and clothing for humans.
5. The homeless choose not to live like normal people.

(see the handout *More Cultural Myths* for more examples)

Assignment

Write a 1000 word essay in which you examine the portrayal of a specific North American cultural myth in the movie *The Mothman Prophecies*. Your essay must include:

1. thoughtful discussion of a cultural myth or norm operating in your own experience of life and at least two North American cultural products such as art, newspapers, television (dramatic or commercial), videogames, fashion, language, etc (approx. 20% of discussion);
2. detailed discussion of the mythology’s presence in the movie (approx. 40% of discussion)
 - the position taken in the movie (reinforcement, resistance, reassurance);
 - the ways in which the mythology is communicated through
 - ◇ narrative elements (plot, character, setting),
 - ◇ visual codes (camera technique, lighting, colour schemes, editing),
 - ◇ audio codes (sound effects, background sounds, musical score), and
 - ◇ symbolic images.
3. thoughtful formulation of the implications of this invisible cultural myth: the effect on viewers of its continued acceptance as natural behaviour (approx. 20% of discussion)

Discussion of the myth’s operation in North American culture (~250 wds)

The purpose of this section of the essay is to establish that the mythology you have identified in the movie is one that actually operates in North American society. One way to detect a cultural myth in operation is to watch for the presence of a binary opposition, one pole of which is coded negative, the other coded positive (see the handout *Reading Movies* for examples of binary oppositions). Another is to observe the ways in which texts emphasize or ignore controversies surrounding current social issues. Look for evidence of relevant issues in news magazines, television commercials, other movies, your own discussions with friends or with parents. Think about the talk shows you have seen. Observe people interacting around you on busses, in malls, at school. Provide detailed description and discussion of the images and language that communicate the myth and explain how the communication works to reinforce or resist the myth.

Describing the movie’s position with respect to the myth (~450 wds)

¹Based on an original idea by Kim Imdieke <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/media_literacy/33233>

In this section of the essay, you bring to bear your critical viewing skills. Analyze what you have seen. Think about how this movie reveals some of the underlying understandings about “reality” that provide a framework for North American values and, ultimately, behaviour. What aspects of North American culture does this text *re-present*? Once you have identified the narrative, visual, and audio elements that communicate the cultural myth, take your analysis to the next level and identify the text’s attitude toward the mythology: does it reinforce, resist, or provide reassurance about the behaviour or values that are justified by the cultural mythology?

Reinforcement occurs when a media text perpetuates a myth or supports a particular cultural attitude. Example: *Saved by the Bell* reinforces America's lack of respect for public education by portraying Mr. Belding as an incompetent buffoon and by depicting students like Screech--who excels in math and science--as nerds.

Resistance occurs when a media text challenges a cultural assumption, often by presenting an alternative view. Example: *Saved by the Bell* resists America's distrust of public education by depicting Bayside High as a safe, positive environment where representatives of various cliques cooperatively learn the lessons of life. The program promotes public school as a provider of a well-rounded education by highlighting the characters' involvement in various extracurricular activities, from student council and debate (Jessie) to athletics (Slater), from cheerleading (Kelly) to choir (the whole cast).

Reassurance occurs when a media text eases the audience's anxiety about a cultural issue. Example: *Saved by the Bell* reassures an audience who might fear the deterioration of American public education. Bayside High will survive long after Zack and his friends have graduated. Screech, in fact, remains at Bayside as an administrative assistant. Perhaps he will follow in the footsteps of Mr. Belding, who is himself a Bayside alumnus.

Hypothesis about the myth’s effect on social behaviour (~250 wds)

Example: Ultimately, by poking fun at teachers and glorifying a group of affluent students. *Saved by the Bell* ignores the true strengths and weaknesses of American public education and distracts our attention from educational reform. It does this, for example, by perpetuating the negative stereotypes about teachers that contribute to the declining popularity of teaching as a chosen profession. ...

The purpose of this section of the essay is to present **and support** your own thoughts about the beneficial or detrimental consequences of the continued acceptance of the mythology. In order to support your hypothesis, depend on logical arguments such as cause and effect, if ... then statements, expert opinion, and statistically significant examples. You may wish to support your suggestion with a proposal for an alternative myth that could provide justification for social change.

For examples of ways to approach this essay, go to the following URLs

<<http://www.suite101.com/articles.cfm/3677/1-20>>

<<http://www.suite101.com/articles.cfm/3677/21-40>>

<<http://www.suite101.com/articles.cfm/3677/41-48>>

Evaluation: See OCDSB Exemplar Booklet for the OAC Exam

- Focus:** (Exemplar booklet 19, 99-100) Organize the essay around a single cultural myth's presence in North American culture and in the movie *The Mothman Prophecies*. The significant elements of the question are
1. identify the cultural myth
 - in North American pop culture
 - ◇ (at least two different examples from different pop culture sources)
 - in *The Mothman Prophecies*
 - ◇ describe the elements that communicate the myth
 - ◇ identify the position taken by the text
 2. argue the consequences of the myth in terms of social behaviour

Development/Support: (see JMSS Style Guide and Exemplar booklet pp. 20, 102-103) This paper asks you to make and to support several claims. Claims must be supported by properly referenced, specific, detailed examples. Both claims and examples must be developed, i.e., general claims must be supported with detailed, factual evidence, the implications of claims and the evidence must be spelled out, and connections between ideas must be clearly explained.

You must use research skills to find newspaper stories, magazine articles, television shows and movies that reflect the operation of the mythology in Canadian or North American culture and, if you choose, that critique the social consequences of the mythology.

In order to attain a mark of higher than 3 for development/ support, your paper must include significant discussion of technical aspects of *The Mothman Prophecies* and popular culture examples.

Organization: A well-written argumentative essay is reader-friendly. At all times, the writer clarifies the connections being made. These clarifications are developed through the order in which claims, examples, and implications are presented and through the rhetorical use of transitions and sub-summary statements that remind the reader what has been argued already and how it is connected to what will be argued next. (See exemplar booklet pp. 21, 104-106)

Style: Use this assignment as an opportunity to develop your communication skills by experimenting with a variety of sentence structures, some new vocabulary, and some use of figurative language and sound techniques to create an elegant, articulate, mature writing style that is aware of its audience. I will be your main audience, but I may also ask some of you to share your articles with the class; therefore, your audience is intelligent, literate, thoughtful, young adults. Because you are writing a scholarly analysis, you must write with an objective voice. Even examples from personal experience can be framed objectively. (See exemplar booklet pp.22, 107)

Mechanics: Look on this assignment as an opportunity to focus on and eliminate some careless mechanical errors in your writing. (see exemplar booklet pp. 23, 110) All research materials must be referenced in the essay and in a Works Cited list using MLA format

solutions to common errors

- | | |
|--|--|
| • the character who | -not "the character that " |
| • This misconception is clear from the images. | -This (what?) is clear from the images. |
| • could have , should have , would have | -not could of |
| • Do not hesitate | -not don't hesitate |
| • The reason for his error is that he has no sense. | - The reason [is because] |
| • He reveals his value system in the fight scene when he takes off his jacket and yells "Yahoo!" | - This [is when] he reveals his value system. |