

## HOW TO BE A CULTURAL CRITIC

**Reading:** Susan Bordo's ["Introduction" to \*Twilight Zones\*](#).

### **STEP ONE: We must recognize the power of the media to influence our attitudes and behaviors...**

"The media are forms of pedagogy that teach us how to be men and women. They show us how to dress, look, and consume; how to react to members of different social groups; how to be popular and successful and how to avoid failure; and how to conform to the dominant system of norms, values, practices, and institutions" (Kellner, 9-10).

*Mainstream media **reflects** and **reinforces** existing norms about how to be a "normal" and "acceptable" woman. As Bordo suggests, no one is immune to the influence of media/media conglomerates. How does the media influence you?*

### **STEP TWO: We need to start thinking critically about what we see and hear instead of just taking those images and sounds for granted...**

"...the work of cultural criticism is not exactly like that of Plato's philosopher, whose enlightenment requires that he transcend his experiences of *this* world and ascend to another, purer realm. Cultural criticism does not so much ask that we leave the cave as turn a light on *in* it. Cultural criticism clears a space in which we can stand back and survey a scene that we are normally engaged in living in, not thinking about" (Bordo, 13-14).

*We need to do more than simply **consume** media; we also need to **critically examine** their effects and agendas.*

### **STEP THREE: We need to ask questions about the damaging ideologies that these images/sounds perpetuate...**

"*The New York Times* has referenced Condoleezza Rice's dress size and 'girlish laugh' on the front page, while *The Washington Post* described her as a 'dominatrix' after she happened to wear a black coat and leather boots together; a *CNN Larry King Live* panel once convened to discuss Hillary Clinton's electoral disadvantage of being 'fat,' 'bottom-heavy,' and 'bitchy.' Needless to say, Donald Rumsfeld's inseam measurements and Rudy Giuliani's comb-over have never been considered newsworthy" (Pozner, 347).

"With created images setting the standard, we are becoming habituated to the glossy and gleaming, the smooth and shining, the ageless and sagless and wrinkleless. We are learning to expect 'perfection' and to find any 'defect' repellent, unacceptable" (Bordo, 3).

### **STEP FOUR: ...recognize our participation in that perpetuation by critically interrogating our own complicated relationship to media as critics and consumers...**

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“As a consumer, I get mild enjoyment watching *Friends*, relaxed by its affable predictability and tempted to cut my own hair like Jennifer Anniston’s. As a cultural critic, my responses to *Friends* become material for concerned reflection on the current fantasies of our culture; I think, for example, about how all these women remind me of Mary Tyler Moore in her early TV shows, and I wonder what this says about cultural nostalgia for that model of femininity” (Bordo, 14).

*We not only consume norms about what it means to be a woman; we also perpetuate those norms through our own behaviors and actions. How do you perpetuate norms?*

“Each of us shapes the culture we live in every moment of our lives, not only in our more public activities but also in our most intimate gestures and personal relationships, for example, in the way we model attitudes towards beauty, aging, perfection, and so on for our children, friends, students, lovers, colleagues” (Bordo, 16).

### **STEP FIVE: ...and learn how to resist being seduced by the images and sounds that bombard us every day.**

[talking about Plato’s cave] “the bedazzlement by created images is no metaphor; it is the actual condition of our lives. If we do not wish to remain prisoners of these images, we must recognize that they are not reality...[We need to recognize] the deceptive ‘virtual realities’ they [images/sounds] create and the actual human realities they obscure and mystify, and the consequences of this deception on some of the most intimate aspects of our lives” (Bordo, 2).

### **STEP SIX: Finally, we must channel our frustration and anger about the damaging images/sounds that media communicate into a nuanced analysis of media.**

*This analysis should occur on many levels. We need to think about “the production and political economy” behind images/sounds. We need to do a “textual analysis” and close reading of the images/sounds themselves. And, we need to think about how the audience receives and uses those images/sounds (Kellner).*

*Our analysis needs to be multi-layered; we need to think critically about how media simultaneously shape norms about gender, race, class, sexuality and ethnicity, for example. How does race shape the different ways in which Condoleezza Rice and Hilary Clinton are represented as women (with Rice as a dominatrix and Clinton as overweight and bitchy)?*

*We must be vigilant and persistent in our critiques. We must watch and listen to a wide range of sources. We must ask questions, such as: Who is producing these images? What agendas do they have? How are they motivated by economics/politics? We must challenge double standards. We must continuously challenge our own taken-for-granted assumptions by shifting our understanding away from, “that’s just the way it is” to, “why is it that way? Who benefits from it being that way?”*

*We need to remember that thinking critically about mainstream media is a powerful tool of resistance and is an important feminist practice.*