

Chapter 15

The shaping influence of film and television on young people's spiritual and moral development: An educational exploration

The media's growing influence has many benefits: informing, educating and entertaining people; increasing awareness of human rights and environmental impacts; breaking down dogma; promoting diversity. But the stories the media tell, which define modern life, are also often driven by the lowest common denominator in public taste. While most societies have taken great care of their stories, today's media present, at one level, a cacophony of conflicting messages and morals; at another, they offer a seductive harmony of harmful influences, both personal and social. As one media critic warns: 'The media claim they are only telling our stories, but societies live and die on stories'.

Richard Eckersley et al., 2006¹

This chapter suggests an area in which the theory in the previous four chapters can be put into practice. It can be addressed through either explicit or contextual approaches or both; it is a social issue with implications for young people's personal development, and it has links with meaning, identity and spirituality. It warrants the attention of professionals involved in the education and care of youth, while it also has relevance to the wider community.

The title of the chapter shows how an issue can be turned into a topic for student investigation – a problem-posing approach. Helping students articulate the problem, investigate it, and theorise about it embodies a pedagogy. But this is not just a teacher's pedagogy, it is a *students' pedagogy* in which they do the teaching, that is, they teach themselves how to become enquiring, critical evaluators of culture. It is the student research process that is educative – and empowering. The enquiry may not result in clear-cut conclusions, but it is through the enquiring process itself that students can become better informed, more discerning and less naive about the shaping influence of film and television on culture, as well as on people's values and behaviour. And hopefully, this same pedagogy can become a habit.

To be effective, a problem-posing approach cannot be haphazard or just serendipitous. Educators need to provide some framework and guidelines for the investigation. Hence the chapter will look at the question in a sequence of steps; this not only provides a theoretical framework for exploring the problem, but gives a useful pedagogical sequence and a logic for the selection of learning resources.

15.1 Introducing the problem: How to investigate a complex question like the spiritual-moral influence of film and television

For many children and adolescents, and indeed for adults, film and television can have a significant formative influence on their meanings, identity and spirituality. While they are primarily about entertainment, increasingly they serve as the most prominent and accessible spiritual and moral reference points in the culture. They also have considerable educational potential, in the broad sense of education as something broader than schooling. Their mechanisms of personal influence can be complex, and they can be as simple as a telling a story. Story is one of the most basic genres in film and television, even in the 30-second commercial. Stories pervade film and television, and the narratives are inevitably value-embedded. They carry images of life, presumed value systems and insights into human motivation.

Thinking about the potential personal influence of film and television can be disconcerting for parents and educators. How to address the issue is problematic because film and television have become such a valuable and enjoyable part of modern life, as well as being ‘omnipresent’ – the television is often the first thing switched on in the morning and the last thing switched off at night.

A *direct* empirical research-like approach to the problem is not very helpful educationally, for example looking for evidence of links between the watching of film or television and human behaviour. Rather, the approach taken here proposes an analysis based within film study: looking at the form and function of the media, and at the purposes of the film-makers. This is intended to inform student *theorising* about the potential influence on viewers. This theorising itself is a potent learning process, enhancing critical thinking about the issues. Through student engagement in critical interpretation, this sort of study can make some contribution towards more reflective, educated viewing; if so, this can help make film and television a more valuable resource for lifelong personal development.

After an introductory discussion of why the metaphor ‘story’ is a useful theme for this exploration, a research sequence is proposed for investigating the spiritual and moral influence of the stories in film and television. While commercial feature films and television dramas and sitcoms do not have the same intended moral influence as propaganda films and documentaries, they can still serve as source material drawn on by children and adolescents in their construction of meaning and identity.

15.2 Story: A central concept for contextualising the spiritual-moral influence of film and television

‘Story’ is like an international currency used in a number of the fields concerned with personal and spiritual development. Story is thought to be an important mediator in the psychological development of children and adolescents. Its role in transmitting meaning is also considered in areas as diverse as sociology, literature, history, anthropology, aetiology, hermeneutics, narrative theology, scripture and religion studies. Story is also prominent in educational theory and practice, especially in moral and religious education; and in socialisation and enculturation, as well as in the processes of home and traditional storytelling. Those concerned with the communication of cultural, ethnic and religious traditions often refer to their endeavour as ‘handing on the story’.²

Story fits within a cluster of related concepts: metaphor, narrative, fable, myth, symbol, image, analogy, and worldview. Reference to story is often made when looking at processes like explanation, understanding, interpretation and social reality.

Given the prominence for story in personal and spiritual development, in all three parts of the exploration, the focus will be on the ways people construct meaning by threading together their own ‘personal story’ while drawing on various ‘cultural stories’. Traditional reference points like home, ethnicity, religion, school and nation might be expected to be basic sources for images of life and values; other no less significant sources can be peers, social and recreational groups. But often these influences are superseded by the ‘storying’ role of film and television. Their stories are vivid, meaning-embedded narratives about life that can eclipse the family or religious stories that have traditionally informed spiritual development and identity. This relativising of the religious story is part of the emerging pattern of a more secular spirituality in today’s youth.³ And film and television narratives can be communicated as much through image, symbol, visuals and music as through the verbal. This is very different from the way traditional religions have tended to rely on the stories in sacred texts.

The film scholar Gerbner drew attention to the massive change in traditional patterns of storytelling that was enabled by film and television: ‘We have moved away from the historic experience of humankind. Children used to grow up in a home where parents told most of the stories. Today television tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time.’⁴ Similarly, Australian scholars Eckersley and his associates considered that ‘[w]hen a community abdicates the role of storytelling to the mass media, particularly commercial media, a focus on wellbeing or the good life is diminished to stories about feeling good. These stories can have a very individual focus.’⁵

15.3 Theorising about the spiritual and moral influence of film and television⁶

One of the aftermaths of shooting massacres (such as Port Arthur in 1996 and Strathfield in 1987), and especially those in schools (Dunblane in Scotland and Columbine High in Colorado) has been a marked increase in community concern about the association between screen violence and violent crime (as well as expected concern about gun control). When it comes to addressing problems like this, parents and educators try to identify the negative and harmful influences so that remedial action can be taken. This usually focuses on two things: identifying *causal links* between the media and harm to young people; and exercising *censorship*.

However, this approach has problems. It is more politically than educationally oriented; it is like trying to eliminate moral problems by making them illegal. Also, concentrating on the negative influences is likely to be counterproductive for young people who get much pleasure from films and television. In addition, there are difficulties in making an evaluation of film and television too dependent on identified causal links between watching the media and particular behaviour. For example: the debate about screen violence tends to presume that as long as there is no identifiable, direct, causal link, then violent films are appropriate for public consumption; and that if there is an identified link, then the material in question should be banned. Not surprisingly, considerable research along these lines has failed to demonstrate unambiguous causal links. Such research tends to neglect the more subtle influence on thinking and feelings, and on what people regard as culturally acceptable – effects that would be difficult to identify and measure in any case.

An example of ambivalence about the personal influence of television was the decision to ban cigarette advertising. The ban presumed that the exposure of children to such advertising increases the probability of introducing them to smoking, which is bad for their health. The facts show that this is true. When the Joe Camel cigarette ads were introduced in the United States in the 1970s, they presented Joe as a fun, cool character who naturally appealed to older children. The Camel cigarette market share rose significantly and their sales to older children and young adults were proportionally much higher.

What is interesting, however, is the argument proposed by the cigarette companies: if the censorship on cigarette advertising is based on the premise that exposure of children to such advertising is harmful because it influences their behaviour, then it is hypocritical to allow so much uncensored violence on television. If the smoking ads are harmful, how can the authorities be sure that screen violence is not?

In contrast to such an empirical approach to the problem, what is proposed here is an *educational exploration of the functions of the media*, particularly under the genre of *story*. This is not concerned with trying to identify empirically the actual level of negative influence, but with educating teachers and other adults, and in turn, children and adolescents, to speculate about the possible ways in which film and television serve as influential cultural reference points that affect the ways people perceive, understand and value the world. This locates the exploration within a ‘critical’ education that seeks to increase awareness of the elements of culture that can have a shaping influence on people’s lives. Another description of this role is helping individuals ‘interrogate their cultural conditioning’.⁷

The overall educational aim, then, is to help people give more thought to the way that cultural elements in films and television enter into their life structure. This alerts them to the issues and can provide information to assist with the analysis of potential problems. We hope this can help educate people towards watching films and television with a more critical, discriminating eye – with the capacity for entertainment undiminished; it may help with the development of ‘taste’ in viewing habits.

Three key principles in an educational approach to film and television

1 The study of film and television must be *positive* and give due attention to the valuable contribution that the media can make to culture, education, entertainment and personal development. Looking only at problems is too negative, and this will inevitably alienate young people, especially if they see it as an attack on their viewing and entertainment habits. A negative approach also plays to the stereotype of parents and teachers who seem to have a schizoid attitude to the media: they love it themselves, but fear it is having negative but undefinable effects on children (apart from its considerable child-minding capacity!).

2 The *meaning/identity/spirituality-forming potential of film and television* can be highlighted progressively through a *study sequence*. It begins by looking at instances where the intention to change people is more obvious, through to those where there is no such intention but where there may be unintended consequences.

- *Propaganda film*, where the aim is specifically and unashamedly concerned with changing people by determining how they will think and act;
- *Documentary film* where the aim is to bring about change in thinking and action through an informed educational process; attention to the dynamics of

propaganda and documentary films is a prerequisite for study of the more complex and subtle patterns of potential influence in feature films, television and in commercial advertising;

- *Commercial feature films*: value-embedded narratives;
- *Television*, which brings entertainment ubiquitously into every home;
- *Television advertising*, which is concerned with promoting the image associations, thinking and behaviour that will sustain markets.

(Note that the third and fourth of these items will be treated together. Apart from advertising, the programs on television can be broadly categorised as ‘film’ and include drama, sitcoms, comedy, current affairs, news, documentaries, cartoons, and so-called ‘reality’ programs.)

3 The centrality of the genre *story* (or *narrative*). Film and television have continuity with the role of storytelling (both verbal and literary) as an influence on spiritual and moral development; they have also enhanced and extended storytelling in major ways with instant accessibility in the homes of people in most countries; the value-embedded narratives from film and television can be used by children and adolescents as raw material for the building of meaning, identity and spirituality.

What is most noticeable by its absence in **the sequence above** is *religious film or television*. This includes three types. First, there are programs that are developed by religious groups as part of their mission: to nurture the faith of believing communities and to evangelise with the purpose of inviting people to faith and congregational membership. The second type includes programs on religion in culture that are not produced by the religious groups themselves and therefore do not have the same religious purposes; rather they have an educational or documentary focus. The third type is where religion enters into feature films, like other aspects of culture.⁸

Because our interest here is with the spiritual and moral dimensions of ordinary film and television, we have chosen not to consider specifically religious programs of the first type. To address that area adequately would go beyond the scope of this already extensive chapter. For example, the potential spiritual influence of this type of religious film or television depends on the belief position of viewers – whether they formally identify with the religious group or not. Nevertheless, our analysis of the psychological dynamics of film and television should be helpful in any further analysis of religious content.

The research sequence outlined **above** has the potential to be extended into a number of other studies. For example:

- How contemporary film and television change what is understood as history and how history is recorded.
- Film and literature studies.
- Film and television and the exploration of particular social issues.
- Relationships with the interpretation of scripture: the modern familiarity with science and film tends to default towards a ‘documentary’ interpretation of the gospels. Such a mentality was foreign to the gospel authors and absent from their texts; applying it to the gospels yields incorrect literal interpretations and inhibits an interpretation that more accurately captures the symbolic and theological meanings.

- The quest for the ‘cinematic Jesus’. The Jesus films, dating from the late 19th century, are like gospels, seeking to communicate an interpretation of what Jesus was like and what he meant to Christians. How do they compare with the gospels themselves and with the findings of contemporary scholarship on the historical Jesus?

15.4 The intended spiritual and moral influence of propaganda film

A logical place to begin the study is with films that were designed deliberately to have a moral influence – propaganda. What follows can accompany an analysis of propaganda film, using a collection of clips readily built up from television and from video/DVD hire and sales. This section can inform about the nature and techniques of this genre. It furnishes a set of categories that helps with the detection of propaganda, showing how film content and presentation are selected for ideological purposes.

The word ‘propaganda’ derives from the Latin verb *propagare*, to reproduce, transmit, spread or disseminate. It implies a systematic scheme to advertise and communicate a particular ideology, pattern of beliefs, values and behaviour. It is often misleading and manipulative; it appeals to the emotions, and resonates with fears and prejudice; and false information is transmitted to promote the cause.

There is a long history of the use of propaganda film dating from the late 19th century when motion pictures were first brought to the public. It is interesting to note that the first intentional users of film for spiritual and moral influence were the Christian churches. Large numbers of early silent films were produced on the Bible and the life of Christ to extend the faith of Christians, to invite new believers and to stimulate devotion. While the churches would not think of these films as propagandist in the same sense they would apply, say, to classic Soviet or Nazi propaganda films, it remains an interesting question to consider where those early films stand within a contemporary analysis of what makes a film propagandist. The documentary *Jesus Christ Moviestar* (1994) shows footage of some of the earliest Bible and Jesus films.

Popular thinking about propaganda film depends a lot on the propaganda from the early Soviet period in Russia and from Nazi Germany. Tracing its history shows that the format became more refined and subtle; it is not entirely lacking in some contemporary films – as Joseph Goebbels said, the best propaganda was where people were not aware that the film was propagandist.

From the time of the Bolshevik revolution, Lenin came to regard film as one of the most important vehicles for promoting popular revolutionary ideology. He thought of film as the art-form of the masses. In 1917, a special Cinema Commission was organised in St Petersburg by the People’s Commissariat of Education; within two years the industry was nationalised under state control. Thence the cinema of the socialist state functioned as a medium of ideology, propaganda, enlightenment, and education.

From that time (until fairly recently) no Soviet leader or film-maker ever pretended that film might serve any other purpose. It was national in form and socialist in content, and it was used by the state as a tool for social control and discipline. In his speech at the XIIIth Congress of the Party, Stalin said that ‘the cinema is the greatest means of mass agitation. The task is to take it into our hands’. Elsewhere he noted that ‘the cinema in the hands of ... power represents a great and priceless force’.⁹

Other leaders like Hitler, Mao Zedong and Winston Churchill also believed in the power of film to shape people’s thinking and behaviour. For them, film was an

indispensable means of propaganda, a way to inculcate ideas and morality and to ensure social uniformity. Especially during times of war or economic hardship, it was essential that films conveyed the right kind of message. Goebbels considered that the view of the world that was first communicated to children would be the most influential and the most difficult to eradicate or change; his thoughts on the role of film in education flowed from this principle.

The study of propaganda film should explore the possible psychological processes through which it works on people's perceptions, imagination and feelings; it should try to identify the ways in which people are affected by what they watch. Viewing segments from some vintage 1930s–40s Nazi propaganda films, from American war films from the 1940s and 1950s, from Leninist and other Soviet films, and from Chinese films of the Maoist period readily exemplifies the intention to use film as a means of social control.

However, the intention to use such films as a potent shaping influence is a long way from a film like the *Wizard of Oz*. Commercial feature films usually share none of the propagandist aims; they are made for entertainment and commercial gain and they are harmless. But not all agree with that judgment. For fundamentalist Muslims, especially in Iran, films and television produced in the United States are at the forefront of 'the enormous appeal of Western culture [which] erodes Islamic customs and laws ... [threatening] the very survival of Islam ... America's popular music, video games, comics, textbooks, literature and art reach throughout the Muslim world.'¹⁰ In Baghdad during the Gulf War air raids, people were still watching Disney cartoons on television. While from this perspective feature films are propagandist and subversive, this view is not shared in Western countries. But perhaps even in the West, the influence of entertainment films, and their omnipresent offspring television, which reaches the masses in the informality of their own sitting rooms (and kitchens, dining rooms, bedrooms, hospital wards, hotels and workplace), is to some extent propagandist in the cause of global consumerism, though this is much more subtle and complex than traditional propaganda.

So even at this first stage of the study, dealing with the characteristics of propaganda film, it is important to note that the boundaries between different film genres can be blurred in people's perceptions. What is entertainment for one may be perceived as subtle propaganda by another. What was effective propaganda at one period of history in one particular community might be dismissed at a later stage as false and misleading – and perhaps even amusing. Today's young people may feel immune to the sort of propaganda films produced during World War II – they can readily see the distortion of the truth; however, they may not have been so discerning had they been there at the time, and they may not be all that discerning of the propaganda in some of today's entertainment films and television.

15.5 The educational function of documentary film

The word 'documentary' derives originally from the Latin *docere*, to teach and *documentum*, a lesson, a proof, a written instrument or official paper. The verb 'to document' meant providing written material which served as proof or evidence, as an illustration or a certificate of verification that something had happened, that it was true. Consequently the adjective 'documentary' meant consisting of written documents, attested and verified historically with written evidence. The term 'documentary film' was coined to describe films that were primarily about scientific,

historical, archaeological, industrial or travel topics. This distinguished them from feature or entertainment films that were usually fictional, or that took fictional liberties with historical topics. However, the choice of term may have been more propitious than was originally intended. It is not surprising that the adjective is now used mainly as a noun; a 'documentary' commonly means a documentary film. With the advent of film a new form of document emerged. It could be used as proof or evidence that something had occurred. Indeed viewers could see for themselves first-hand what really happened; they could judge directly from their own observation of the evidence. Photographs and film became key proofs or touchstones of truth. It has only been in recent times that digital creations, computer-generated images and digital enhancement have undermined this credibility.

Neil Postman argued that the form and the medium of human communication shape the way people experience and describe the world, and thus the way they derive meaning and values.¹¹ Since its origins, writing has had an enormous influence on culture; the proof and evidence of 'having it in writing' still remains forceful, especially from a legal and official point of view. But now film and television have changed what people think is 'the news'; they have subtly changed people's perception and understanding of what is real, of what 'most people' think, and even of what is the truth. Postman noted that the media had influenced the prevailing epistemology: for some 'it must be true' because 'we saw it on television'.

The contemporary experience of documentary film and television, greatly enhancing the changes brought about by science and technology, have changed people's perception of what constitutes history and how it is to be recorded. They have a historico-scientific expectation of the recording of history that is primarily documentary – that is, through both documentary (written) evidence, and, since the advent of film, documentary film evidence.

15.5.1 Objectivity, impartiality and advocacy in documentaries: The potential of documentaries for bringing about personal change

A key problem to be overcome with a study of documentary film is *familiarity* – people tend to think they already know all about it. There is a need to look at segments of documentaries that raise critical issues about objectivity, impartiality and potential to distort the truth; to do this, we will refer to some examples from the 1990s.

15.5.2 Objectivity, impartiality and the making of an advocacy film

The American film director Heather Macdonald was asked by an Australian reviewer if her documentary *Ballot Measure 9* (screened in April 1996), about discrimination against gay and lesbian people, was biased and therefore constituted propaganda because it gave more attention to the 'no vote' cause than to those who were overtly supportive of discrimination. Should the documentary have given 'equal air time' to both sides to demonstrate impartiality? In her reply, she noted that it was virtually impossible for a film-maker to be completely objective and impartial, since every decision about what to include – even deciding the camera angles – represented a point of view or bias. She pointed out that many documentaries were 'advocacy' films: they set out to persuade people towards a particular point of view. She tried to inform and influence the band of people in the community spectrum who were open to change and to potential action on behalf of what she considered a just cause (the

intended target audience); those who were strongly prejudiced against homosexuals would inevitably be untouched or angered by her film (it was not for them); and those who were opposed to the discrimination were already on 'her side' and did not need 'conversion', so to speak. Thus going to great lengths to appear impartial and objective (for example by giving equal time to protagonists and antagonists) would have been artificial, given the stated purposes of the film; also, such an approach would have taken the 'cutting edge' from the film, running the risk of losing the interest of the target audience. But, she argued, her presentation and technique were not subversive. She presented evidence that was there to be interpreted; her approach appealed to reason, evidence and human values; her own value position was made clear. The various documentaries of Michael Moore in recent years are examples of what we might call provocative advocacy films.

15.5.3 Documentaries, feature films and mythology: General Custer – the legend versus the truth

Within a few days of the death of US General George Armstrong Custer in 1876 at the Little Big Horn, the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper was stirring up public opinion about the need for uncompromising government military action 'to teach the savages a lesson' and force them onto reservations. The Lakota Sioux and some other Native American bands had evidently 'failed to comply' with federal policy, even though it was the United States that had broken the treaties negotiated earlier. Something had to be done because 'white men had been massacred'. The press drew on, and reinforced negative stereotypes about the Native Americans – they were the 'last barrier to the development of the West'. Custer was hailed as a hero with bravery of the highest order; he was regarded as a 'martyr for civilisation'.

Within a year, William Cody (aka Buffalo Bill) was packing audiences into his Wild West Show in New York where the star attraction and climax of the afternoon was a staged re-enactment of what was called 'Custer's last stand'. In 1885, he was able to get Chief Sitting Bull himself – the Native American chief who was supposedly the architect of Custer's death – to appear briefly in the show for a fee of \$50. By the turn of the century, Custer's last stand made its way into the cinema, eventually featuring in about a dozen films. They developed and reinforced the legend, and sustained the underlying worldview that went with it; and the legend became 'reality' (cf. Errol Flynn as Custer in *He died with his boots on*). Ironically, it was Mrs Custer, and not her late husband, who became rich and famous, widely patronised, living on Park Avenue, New York – as Custer had hoped for when writing his diaries.

Then, about 120 years after the event, some documentaries were produced that presented a different view of what happened at the Little Big Horn. Letters, official cavalry records and interviews with Native Americans whose grandparents were involved showed a side of the general that was not flattering. Custer was reckless, harsh and ambitious, impetuous and unpopular with his men, and he did not always follow orders in his quest for personal glory as a famous 'Indian fighter'. The documentaries also showed the story from the perspective of the Native Americans.¹² Their statutory rights to the Black Hills of Dakota had been abrogated; some, particularly Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse's band, were convinced that reservation life would mean 'spiritual and cultural death'. They had avoided the soldiers for as long as they could; then they discovered that an armed ambush of their campsite

(sheltering families and children) was about to take place. Custer's plan was similar to the one he used in the 1868 ambush and massacre of Black Kettle's band on the Washita River. Inevitably, and justifiably from their point of view, the Native Americans defended themselves and their families. Because these documentaries presented a more extensive and truthful account of what happened, they undermined the traditional Custer legend. They also highlighted the long prevailing negative attitude to Native Americans that had sustained the Custer myth. Their brave defence of family and home, while being repeatedly deceived as regards government treaties, made the indigenous attempts to defend their homeland and freedom more understandable and honourable.

This example raises a series of interesting questions about relationships between history, myth, legend, worldview, prejudice and documentary film. These questions, pertinent to the Custer legend, have generic analogues relevant to other issues:

- Is it likely that these critical, historical documentaries could have been made say in the 1930s or the 1950s?
- If they were made during that period, would they have been 'believed' by many of the viewing public?
- To what extent do historical documentaries like this help change public understanding, historical interpretations and attitudes?
- To what extent does the acceptability and potential educational influence of a documentary depend on some change in public opinion having already occurred – in this instance, more public readiness to look at the indigenous point of view?
- How do the messages in these documentaries relate to feature films about Native Americans? Have the feature films been influential in changing public attitudes towards them? Do they prepare the ground for, and work in harmony with, documentary films? For example, films like *Little Big Man* (1971) and *Dances with Wolves* (1990) showed the situation more sympathetically from the perspective of the Native Americans.
- Has the educational power of documentaries gradually increased? Is their influence dependent on increased levels of general education, including a better public understanding of the informing role of film and television?
- What proportion of the community are receptive to new information in documentaries that might change their attitudes?
- What are the aspects of documentaries that have potential for bringing about change? Are the informational aspects or the emotional ones more important?
- Has it been the growth of television that enabled the documentary industry? Would there be as many educational or political or social documentaries if they appeared only in cinemas on the 'big screen' in competition with feature films?

15.5.4 The 'voice of God' documentary: The 'truth' from the perspective of hindsight

Documentaries like the Custer example attempt to *reconstruct* the truth from the perspective of hindsight. Historical research is usually prominent in their development; they try to recreate events as they happened by bringing to light what was 'caught on film' or reconstructed in the light of historical evidence. In addition, they try to highlight the original decision-making and motives, which may not have

been clear at the time, or which were not publicly available or open to scrutiny; and they set out to interpret events within the sociocultural context of their time.

The commentary, or voice-over, is like the ‘voice of God’ providing the wise, authoritative interpretation of ‘what really happened’. Often this documentary process does uncover what was not widely appreciated during the original events. But it is important to acknowledge that this is a later interpretation made with the aid of hindsight and incorporated into the commentary. The field of hermeneutics (noted in **2.10.14**) is pertinent here. ‘Voice of God’ documentaries represent the considered views of experts and historians.

Three significant educational implications are:

1. There is educational value in helping young people develop their own skills in historical or documentary interpretation; they can learn from analysing the documentary processes used in film, and this can flow over into critical interpretation of events in their own social sphere, as well as in their own personal history. This relates to the discussion of ‘narrative’ identity structure in section 6.3.2.
2. There is a need to recognise that while the interpretations from hindsight are valuable, they remain interpretations and as such may not show all of the truth; they can be revised and refined but never absolutised (for example, we now know who ‘Deep Throat’ was, but what happened on the grassy knoll in November 1963 may always remain a mystery). More scholarly interpretations can help show the bigger picture to past events, but they do not replace the idiosyncratic, personal interpretations of those ‘who were there’ – interpretations that show the personal meanings and emotions of participants. These two sorts of complementary interpretations are evident in documentaries of World War II (and others) that provide both ‘big picture’ interpretation and the recollections of those who experienced the events first-hand.
3. Documentaries are important for educating young people in history and in helping them appreciate the development of historical perspective.

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15.5.5 *Cinema vérité* (Cinema truth) documentary

Some feature films take a historical focus, while including fictional elements and not trying to be too accurate in historical interpretation. They have a loose connection with the idea of documentary, and hence a problematic relationship with the truth. The French documentary notion of *cinéma vérité* records what is happening in real time, with little or no commentary from the film-maker, and at times limited editorial restructuring, so that the film tells the story as it happens in its own words. One English example of a film in this category is *The War Room*, documenting the presidential campaign of Bill Clinton.

Cinéma vérité intends to present data in relatively ‘uncut’ form for viewers to draw their own interpretation. But even here, there is editorial direction behind what is filmed and what is included. One example of this format, *The betrayed*, by the English film-maker Clive Gordon, looked at the conflict in Chechnya through the eyes of the rebels, as well as from the perspective of Russian soldiers, and a group of Russian women whose soldier sons were lost in battle; each group told its own story.

However, Gordon's commentary on his film explained how he tried to highlight multiple layers to the theme of betrayal – on the part of those who did the betraying (Russian authorities, the army, and the Chechen rebels whose activities in a sense betrayed the security of their own families), as well as from the perspective of those who were on the receiving end of betrayal (the rebels, their wives and families, the soldiers, the mothers of the dead soldiers). While the film had no commentary, what was provocative was the selection of Russian rock music as a soundtrack (some critics referred to the film as a 'rock-umentary'). Gordon did so because this was the sort of music that was blaring in the Russian tanks as they went into battle; for the film-maker, this stark contrast between the music and the battle footage reflected the surreal, life-and-death situation of the soldiers and their personal ambivalence at being involved. What this and similar documentaries show is that editorial interpretation still enters into the film-making process even where it is trying to present reality as it was experienced; it is as if the film-maker is seeking to make the viewing experience more emotionally compelling. This relates to what was said above about advocacy films.

15.5.6 Documentaries and critical social consciousness: Educational implications

If one looks at the history of documentary films in the English-speaking world (particularly the social, cultural and historical documentaries), the impression gained is that they have gradually become more impartial and less nationalistic, but more political, more values-conscious, more subtle in their interpretation, less afraid of criticising authority and more ready to identify ideology and evaluate it – and as a result they have less tendency to be propagandist and therefore greater educational potential. This seems to have gone hand in hand with a better educated and politically more astute general public. Perhaps people today are better educated precisely because of documentary films they have seen on television.

While it took about 120 years for a critical documentary on George Custer to emerge, the Falklands War and the Gulf War were critically 'film documented' within about ten and five years respectively (these documentary interpretations were different from the daily news reports which were shown during the actual wars and which did not give a complete picture of what was happening). In 1996, however, the documentary *The death of Yugoslavia* was reporting and interpreting the political background to very recent events, from some years to a few months before the film was released. This seems to suggest that both the art of making documentaries and the critical receptivity of the viewing public have developed over the years. In the 2003 US–British invasion of Iraq, journalists were 'embedded' in the military forces. Was this the ultimate – presenting documentaries in 'real time'? Or were there also political reasons for this arrangement?

Whatever the answers to these questions, one thing is clear: an education in media needs to give attention to the nature, purpose and educational influence of documentary films. Good, critical use should be made of documentary material at school, ranging from films on nature and the environment through to documentaries with a critical perspective on history, culture and politics like those discussed above. The characteristics of documentaries will be summarised later to highlight their educational value.

There are other related questions about documentaries:

- the appropriateness and reliability of oral history used in documentaries;

- the use of narrative structures and interpretive frameworks in documentaries that raise questions about what constitutes history and how documentaries may serve as knowledge and evidence;
- the ethics of the documentary film-maker; the ethics of current affairs television journalists: exposure of fraud and impropriety, ‘walk-up’ interviews and the pursuit of interviewees, confidentiality and right to privacy, and ‘cheque book’ journalism;
- the relationships between documentaries and feature films with semi-historical narratives.

15.5.7 The contrast between propaganda and documentary films

Table 15.1 reports an example of the contrasts that can be drawn between propaganda and documentary films as a result of a study by a group of teachers. Examining segments of film, discussing their purposes, format and techniques, and making comparisons can help develop critical skills in film viewing and interpretation. The table gives a preliminary range of analytic and interpretive categories, which helps develop alertness to the clues as to how and why a film is trying to influence viewers.

As noted earlier, the differences between the two types may at times be blurred. Propaganda may now be more subtle and masked with the credibility and supposed educational purpose of the documentary; propaganda may lie concealed in the unarticulated assumptions and worldview that are embedded in a particular film. Some documentaries mimic the action genre in feature films by concentrating on the bizarre and the emotive to sway the audience to a particular interpretation, while remaining relatively superficial when discussing the important issues (this is also evident in some current affairs television programs). This ideas in the table can be applied to social documentaries, as well as to political campaigns, issues discussed on current affairs programs, and advertising.

Table 15.1 Perceived differences between propaganda and documentary films

Characteristics	Propaganda films	Documentary films
General purpose of the film-maker	Seeks to present material with the intention of promoting a particular ideology. The content is not necessarily factual and historical.	Claims to present factual and historical materials from a critical perspective to promote a more informed public.
Relationship with ideology	Tries to promote belief in, and commitment to, a particular cause or ideology.	Through trying to promote the idea of being well informed about issues, it may attempt to expose ideologies and evaluate them from a particular value stance or perspective.
Relationship with what viewers might believe	Proposes particular values and principles to believe in.	Identifies what people believe about particular issues; increases the range of what viewers might believe, but does not usually prompt them to believe.
Relationship with critical dialogue	Tries to avoid critical dialogue, but will give arguments for its own ideology as well as criticism of opponents.	Tries to open issues up for debate and critical dialogue.

Relationship with authority	Is usually produced by authorities to reinforce their power and social control; film is an agent of cultural hegemony; strongly supports the authority base; may be authoritarian and self-righteous in tone.	Often (but not always) produced <i>not</i> by the authorities in the field; may call authorities into question or towards accountability. Usually open and non-authoritarian in tone.
Level of objectivity and impartiality	Not objective or impartial, but may try to give the impression that it is.	Tries to be objective and impartial but may reflect a particular value stance or bias that is often acknowledged; may acknowledge its intention in advocacy of a cause.
Concern for unanimity and uniformity	Intends to promote both unanimity and uniformity	Usually more concerned with a plurality of views; may seek to promote more consensus; may seek the best and most accurate interpretation available.
Level of advocacy	Strongly advocates a particular view.	May advocate a particular view; this is usually acknowledged (e.g. care for the environment).
Concern for rational persuasion	Tries to be very persuasive but may not bother with rational argument or logic.	Concerned with rational persuasion; may aim at promoting change in thinking and attitudes based on an appeal to evidence, reason and common values.
Appeal to the emotions	Strong appeal to the emotions.	Usually more concerned with rational persuasion but may highlight emotive issues; may seek emotional identification from the viewers in support of people treated unjustly, and/or in support of the values being advocated.
Proposing of identity	Proposes a group identity over and against that of other groups, often with a feeling of superiority and self-righteousness; clearly identifies other groups to be feared and watched; may prompt suspicion of, and action against, other groups.	Often tries to acknowledge and explore different identities and related conflicts but is not concerned with promoting any particular identity; tends to presume that any sense of identity needs to be well informed with some capacity for critical thinking.
Appeal to nationalism, ethnic identity, fear of other groups.	Often appeals strongly to nationalism and tries to reinforce it; similarly, appeals to ethnic identity and fear (and even dislike or hatred) of rival groups.	Usually no appeal to nationalism or ethnic identity; may seek to expose the influence of nationalism, racism, ethnic elitism, fear of particular groups etc; usually appeals to the values in cultural or ethnic plurality, equality and intercultural communication.

[Table stub not styled]

15.5.8 Concluding comment on the educational significance of the documentary film

It is interesting to note that film study in its own right has now become a recognised and important part of many Australian universities' programs in Arts at undergraduate, postgraduate and research levels. In addition, some film study appears in units within disciplines such as English, History, Sociology and Law. It is time that more serious attention was given to film study by those concerned with values and religious education. At present, the film studies academics seem to have a better appreciation of the spiritual and moral significance of film and television than educators. For example, a prominent text on documentary film studies noted that:

The pleasure and appeal of documentary film lies in its ability to make us see timely issues in need of attention, literally. We see views of the world, and what they put before us are social issues and cultural values, current problems and possible solutions, actual situations and specific ways of representing them. The linkage between documentary and the historical world is the most distinctive feature of this tradition ... [It] contributes to the formation of popular memory. It proposes perspectives on and interpretations of historical issues, processes and events ... Documentaries show us situations and events that are recognisably part of a realm of shared experience; [they] provoke or encourage response, shape attitudes and assumptions ... [They] have a powerful, pervasive impact.¹³

This does not sound all that different from moral education. Hence the importance of film study for educators. Also, if film and television remain a central part of young people's alternative, informal, experiential education, then their school's formal education should give it special attention. In this way school education can help them learn how to derive more sense and value from this significant part of their informal education.¹⁴

15.6 Commercial feature films and television: Their potential for influencing the meaning, identity and spirituality of young people

Feature films, in addition to their presence in cinemas, are now commonly watched at home on commercial videos and DVDs, as well as on broadcast and pay television. Access to films for entertainment is now at its highest level ever in most countries. The words 'home cinema' would have had little meaning for people in the 1940s and 1950s; they would have had no inkling of the prominence that film would come to have through its prevalence in home entertainment as well as in the public cinema. Film, and especially its progeny television and video games, would change patterns of social life significantly.

Both propaganda and documentary films are intentionally concerned with personal change. However, this intention is usually disclaimed in commercial feature films and most television, even though they often have implied moral and political messages and, in television, a wealth of commercial ones. Hence the analytical categories built up in sections **15.4** and **15.5** for interpreting potential spiritual and moral influence may have limited applicability to this genre, and will not be enough to account for its effects on viewers.

The personal influence of commercial film may be more of an *unintended consequence*. Any particular film may have little or no effect on people, apart from its entertainment function. But over many years, the combination of film and television may have subtle but significant effects. It is more likely to be the *culture* or *atmosphere* of entertainment films and television that is influential; it can insinuate attitudes and values, and it creates the most potent image of what constitutes the ‘good life’. And this influence is mediated mainly through its *storying* role.

Television is more complex than feature film because while films are prominent in its content, television gives special attention to public information, news, sport, current affairs, education and advertising, as well as to its own varied entertainment formats. But, in the light of comments made about the primal storytelling role of film and television, it will be possible to bracket the two together for most of the following analysis; hence ‘film’ will be used generically to stand for both feature films and television. Then, at the end of the chapter, special attention will be given to television because of its omnipresence in the culture and its strong links with commercial advertising.

Also relevant to this discussion is the *educative function* of film and television. While specifically educational programs are akin to the documentary genre considered earlier, entertainment-oriented film and television make an enormous contribution to people’s education. They occasion much new knowledge; they provide people with a vicarious experience of different cultures, ethnic groups and countries that would otherwise not be within their horizons; they show various perspectives on contemporary issues; and they help to develop historical perspective.

15.7 Sequence: Analysis of possible mechanisms through which film and television may affect spiritual and moral development

What follows is in the domain of ‘exploratory theorising’. In an introductory way, it will consider various psychological mechanisms through which film and television might influence the spiritual and moral development of viewers generally, and young people in particular. This extends an earlier discussion of the role of education in overcoming ‘media naivety’.¹⁵ The section headings are listed below.

- 15.7.1 Relationships with documentary and propaganda film
- 15.7.2 The storytelling role of films and television: Emotional engagement of the viewer
- 15.7.3 Identifying and evaluating the spiritual dimension to life as portrayed in film and television
- 15.7.4 Osmosis of values from films and television?
- 15.7.5 The ‘social reality’ of film and television and ‘reality television’
- 15.7.6 Meeting viewer needs and interests
- 15.7.7 Escapism and idealism through virtual journeys
- 15.7.8 The film as fable: Communicating moral messages
- 15.7.9 Television drama and sitcoms as 21st-century morality plays
- 15.7.10 Film/television and the imagination: Learning through imaginative identification and imaginative rehearsal
- 15.7.11 Story and imagination: The role of film/television in both enhancing and diminishing the imagination
- 15.7.12 Media-orchestrated imaginations: How film and television can affect behaviour and personal development
- 15.7.13 Film and television as sources of images, stereotypes and myths
- 15.7.14 Role modelling: Film heroes and heroines

- 15.7.15 The sensitivity of children to implicit messages in the media
- 15.7.16 Action films: 'Cinematic adrenalin' and the potential relationship between film violence and violent behaviour
- 15.7.17 The 'evangelising' purpose of particular film directors
- 15.7.18 An example film study illustrating issues in spirituality and identity

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15.7.1 Relationships with documentary and propaganda film

Commercial feature films are, in the main, different in character and purpose from propaganda and documentary films. Their purpose is *to entertain* and to be a *commercial success*. But all three types use the same basic filmic techniques, so interrelationships should not be ruled out.

Historically or politically oriented feature films can have documentary and even propagandist characteristics to varying degrees. For example, a film may be subtly propagandist if its unstated worldview reinforces a particular ideology, and this may depend on the cultural context of the audience (an example would be the Iranian interpretation of American films noted earlier). Also, the idea of evangelising for a cause is not unknown in movie producers and directors. Thus familiarity with the characteristics of propaganda and documentary films, as discussed earlier, is a prerequisite for a critical evaluation of feature films and television. Correspondingly, an understanding of the purposes and techniques of feature films can inform the evaluation of documentary films because documentary film-makers make use of narrative techniques and effects to enhance the impact of their films.

15.7.2 The storytelling role of films and television: Emotional engagement of the viewer

Storytelling, in the view of many film-makers, is the basic fabric of films. It is central to their audience appeal and entertainment value. Storytelling was taken to a new level when television was introduced to the majority of homes in industrialised nations; limited but significant access to television also came to the so-called undeveloped countries. In addition, television advertising has a strong story component, and often depends on this for success.

What is known as the classic 'Hollywood style' of film-making, which has left a lasting impression on films made in the English-speaking world and beyond, has its principal emphasis on *story*. The structure, techniques and appeal of such films are built on the presumption that 'everybody loves stories'. Understanding how films are crafted to make the narrative more effective for the audience is one track into speculation about their personal influence. Also, the appeal of films made in the United States, an appeal that cuts across many cultural and national boundaries, suggests that they have an international influence. Some commentators regard film and television as the principal means, along with popular music, by which there has been an 'Americanisation' of world culture. In this sense, the United States has conquered the world through its films and music. This influence is also evident in clothing fashions, consumer goods, language, and aspects of lifestyle. As noted earlier, some are conscious of this influence washing over their world, with its potential to erode traditional beliefs and practices.

Constructing a story through film is a highly skilled art-form. Everything is done to make the film involve the viewer in the narrative. But the techniques for achieving this are intended to be invisible, except to the skilled eye. The aim is to get the audience so thoroughly involved with the story, so identified with the characters, that they do not notice the set design, the camera angles or the editing – the perfect style is *invisible*.¹⁶ Part of learning how to ‘read’ what is happening in films requires the development of skills in identifying the ‘artwork’ in the film’s construction and reflecting on its function.

The American film director Martin Scorsese interpreted film storytelling as follows:

Everything is at the surface of the story. Every decision is based on how to most efficiently and expressively drive the story forward for an audience. It is not what it seems – the actors’ expressions are designed to sweep an audience into the central drama of the story. It is the director on the set who orchestrates each craft’s contribution to the storytelling process: scripting, costume and production design, lighting, camera work, editing, acting – all supported by an army of experts and technicians working together to achieve the *most emotionally compelling result*.¹⁷

The soundtrack, especially the evocative music and the contrasting silences, contribute to this effect. The soundtrack is probably more potent when the audience is not specifically conscious of it, because the ‘emotion’ in the music matches the drama in the film; the music magnifies the emotions of the viewers caught up in the action of the film.

The audience enters the world of the story; more precisely, the film draws them into the ‘worldview’ of the characters – seeing how they experience what is happening, feeling what they feel, identifying at some level with their beliefs and values. Special attention is given to the emotional point of view of the main characters; it is mainly through their eyes and feelings that viewers experience the story.

15.7.3 Identifying and evaluating the spiritual dimension to life as portrayed in film and television

It has been suggested above that film and television provide resource material for people’s construction of meaning, identity and spirituality, even though this is not the intention of the film-makers or the media industry. But it is a potential unintended consequence that needs to be taken into account by educators and the wider community, and it warrants investigation by students at school.

Some critics claim that much of what happens in film and television, in the drama and sitcoms as well as in advertising, gives the impression that life goes on without a spiritual dimension. The social reality they project often shows people giving little time to moral reflection. Also, the treatment of religion is often so stereotypical as to be negative.

On the other hand, it can be argued that film and television are rich in portrayals of meaning, identity and spirituality, even though the moral content and implied values are not always positive. The spiritual and moral dimensions are certainly there, but they are embedded in the characterisation, just as they are in novels, and are not written in so explicitly that the narratives become homiletic or moral exhortations; to

do that would render them inauthentic and unpopular as entertainment – as well as making any evangelising purpose counterproductive.

Evaluation of the spiritual and moral dimension to film and television requires two levels of interpretation. First, there is interpretation of the film or program itself. It is not an instrument of moral education and does not have an inherent responsibility to project particular values or follow any intended moral pedagogy. As an artistic construction with its own integrity, whether or not it is a ‘good’ film should not be judged by the moral content of its story; many criteria would be involved in such a judgment, and many of these criteria would be subjective. For example, one could not expect a film about Hitler or Stalin to get a high ‘moral score’ on the basis of the morality of the principal characters.

A second level of interpretation and evaluation is concerned with the moral and spiritual issues raised in the film. This evaluation is not concerned with the film per se, apart from reference to it as a vehicle for demonstrating moral stances that are judged positive or negative. Also, this interpretive activity is made with reference to some accepted set of values. For example, the values demonstrated by Hitler and Stalin in a film could be judged harshly.

One could expect that most people are capable of seeing the difference between these two levels of interpretation and evaluation.

Values and morals are as essential to the coherence of a film as they are to people’s ordinary lives; if not, the story would hardly be credible. If there were not minimal awareness of implied values in the film’s characters, it would be unlikely that a viewer could comprehend the story or empathise with the characters. What is important, then, for any ‘education in film’ is to enhance this ‘value sensitivity’ and make it more articulate through film analysis that develops skills in identifying implied spiritual and moral issues. This analytical work could be extended to include the identification of ideology, power, hegemony, cultural stereotypes and so on as considered in Chapter 2.¹⁸

The potential for affecting people’s meanings, identity and spirituality usually cannot be related to one-off learning events; hence there is little point trying to judge whether one film could do this. It is more likely that the *culture* of film, to which people are exposed over a long period, has a more subtle influence than could be predicted from identifying spiritual-moral issues and value stances in particular films. It may not be the social reality of a particular film, but a more comprehensive social reality projected by the culture of film, television and advertising that affects people personally; this subtle, ‘global’, ‘atmospheric’ influence may be a source of meaning for some that is ultimately frustrating and damaging, contributing along with other cultural factors to anomie and distress; for others, they may have drawn on this culture in a healthy way, while for yet others their meaning may never be influenced by the social reality of film.

The potential spiritual-moral influence of film operates through a number of different psychological pathways, some of which are considered in the sections below.

15.7.4 Osmosis of values from films and television?

Just how much people in general, and impressionable children in particular, can absorb in the way of values from identification with film characters and ‘film worlds’

is an open question and impossible to determine. It is nevertheless useful to consider a general process of personal learning in which individuals, even in a relatively unconscious way, can take on board the values and worldviews that are operating behind the scenes in films.

As noted in the previous section, to understand and follow the story in film, viewers need to enter into the worldviews and value systems that form the fabric of the narrative; if they do not give the film's implied worldview at least some plausibility as far as the story is concerned, then the story will have no perceived coherence – it will not be believable. Film worldviews or values systems are usually not articulated, but authors and film-makers presume that people can pick them up readily from the clues in their narratives. The capacity to make sense of stories (in film as well as in novels) is a basic human ability that quickly and almost unconsciously builds up an impression of the values out of which the characters operate. By entering vicariously into a story, the viewer in a sense 'participates' in its worldview and temporarily acknowledges the values in the characters so that they can make sense of the action as consistent with the characters' motives. It is possible to absorb and 'learn' values from this experience, just as one can learn from exposure to values in real life; there may be an attraction for the particular values embedded in some stories, and there may be repulsion from others.

When a film is over, viewers usually disengage from the story with their own worldview and values system remaining in a normative position. Almost intuitively, people will know that their values are different from many of those embedded in films, and they know when their values are the same as those displayed by particular characters. But if individuals do not have a reasonably well-developed set of beliefs and values (whether religiously motivated or not), or if there is a vagueness and fluidity in them, then perhaps they will be more vulnerable to influence from the value systems in which they are immersed when they watch films and television. Many years of exposure to the implied value systems and lifestyles in film might incline young people to a particular way of thinking and valuing.

The values and worldviews operative in film are presumed background. If viewers deal with this dimension to a story in an unreflective way, they may not learn to identify and articulate the underlying values; the film's worldview will then go largely unnoticed and barely scrutinised, but nonetheless it will be potentially influential; the more it remains unnoticed in the background, the greater its potential for spiritual and moral influence. For example, in many films the story presumes that casual sex is a natural and taken-for-granted part of a first date. The film is not arguing a case for this view; it is simply presenting it as 'reality'. And reality is hard to argue against. If people have not clarified their own moral code on this issue, then it is probable that they could drift along with a film's inherent values (or lack of positive values) to some extent. They can get the impression that most other people share that same view; it looks attractive, fun-filled and not harmful; and this seems to give a popular justification of casual sex that can in turn affect their behaviour. When they are in a situation where a decision about this is required, they may lean towards the film-reinforced view that 'this is OK'. Thus the value systems from the film world can form individuals' values by default.

Sometimes the values matrix in film may not so much be the source of values for a particular viewer but a reinforcement of values he or she already has. For example, one 5-year-old girl, whose personality was considerably more aggressive and

boisterous than that of her siblings, said that when she grows up she wanted to become a gladiator like those in the television program. It could be that the *Gladiators* program was more of a cultural reinforcement and validation of her aggressive orientation than its cause. Screen violence could affect people in the same way. If screen violence has a cultural acceptability as public entertainment, then for some it could serve as a cultural validation of their inclination to violent behaviour (15.7.16).

An educational response to the presumed worldviews in film would include efforts to help children and adolescents learn first how to *identify* the implied values in films and television programs and to see how the behaviour of the characters is meaningful and consistent with those values; then they can call into question how realistically that view represents reality; finally, the values can be appraised in the light of other standards – for example, the rights of people in democratic countries, human values and religious values, and the values espoused by the school.

For study of film portrayals of casual sexual relationships, the following sorts of questions can be proposed:

- Do all casual sexual relationships in the real world run as smoothly and without embarrassment or hurt to either party as they seem to in films?
- Are one or both of the parties in casual sexual relationships personally compromised in some ways that are not shown in films?
- What if one partner becomes more emotionally attached and committed than the other?
- Is it realistic that questions about contraception are rarely raised before casual sex portrayed in films?
- Does casual sex in films overrate the significance of sex in the personal communication and bonding between people?

The activity of ‘deconstructing’ a film story (sitcom or television commercial) to highlight the presumed values is a useful one educationally. This is central to the skill of being able to ‘read’ film and television: subjecting them to the same type of evaluation that one might apply to a novel, identifying plot, characterisation and so on.

15.7.5 The ‘social reality’ of film and television and ‘reality television’

Another way of putting the above argument is to suggest that film and television have a spiritual and moral influence through their communication of social reality – what people think real life is about (15.7.3). The film and television images and stories can build expectations about lifestyle. For some, the social reality within their own home and school calls into question what is projected by the media. Those who do not have this support are more susceptible to the social reality they perceive on the screen.

The emergence of so-called ‘reality television’ as a popular category raises further questions about the social reality projected by television. The following suggests one way of analysing the spiritual-moral dimension to this phenomenon.¹⁹

Analysing the spiritual-moral dimension to ‘reality television’: More than meets the eye

At first sight, a spiritual-moral dimension to reality television seems unlikely and hardly worth pursuing. Much reality television appeals to the ‘winners over losers’ mentality; viewers have a sense of participative power in voting the outcomes; there is

criticism and humiliation in the sequential ousting of competitors; the raw emotion of participants is on show for all to see; even for a day, ordinary people can become celebrities; and celebrities can display their ordinariness as gardeners. The potential for spiritual-moral content seems limited, and what *is* there seems not worth recommending, especially when the driving commercial purpose of doing anything to achieve viewer ratings is taken into account.

On closer inspection, however, reality television demonstrates a spiritual-moral dimension both in the onscreen participants and viewers, even if this is not particularly influential or novel. Nevertheless, part of an education that advances young people's critical interpretation of television culture is learning how to discern the psychological and spiritual dynamics in what is consumed as public entertainment. There is a spiritual-moral dimension to ordinary life, even where this is filmed for broadcast television; tapping into this dimension is a part of what attracts viewers' interest, even if superficially. There are both positive and negative spiritual aspects of reality television; both need identification and evaluation. It has been around long enough now to have subcategories.

The 'how to' programs

There is an ever increasing number of popular 'how to' programs that focus on lifestyle, whether it be in gardening, renovation, house buying, cooking, travel and makeovers. This is the 'softer' side of reality television. Beneath the surface is the presumption that lifestyle, environment and personal fulfilment are linked. Having a specifically designed garden promotes a more 'organic' and 'holistic' lifestyle – in other words, making a living space more spiritual or bringing the spirituality of nature into the living space; the green and freshness of nature have a calming influence; time needs to be put aside for the relaxed enjoyment of an attractive ambience. The renovators are striving to make the most of their homes; they may want to create some tranquillity and symmetry that can impact on their lifestyle. Cooking an attractive and healthy meal is an art, with respect for the ingredients, and needs to be more than just functional; the eating thereof is a communal celebration. Travel is proposed to be more about enjoyment of other cultures and nature than about material pleasure. The makeovers show how good looks and designer clothes are important for success. While these 'messages' may end up trapping people to some degree in a slavery to externals, they do highlight people's basic need for affirmation and acceptance.

Many of the programs start with a bad situation that is to be made good. There is the dishevelled garden; the dreary, untidy room; the poorly dressed person; and the face and hair in need of a makeover. The wrong is to be made right, the ugly made attractive; assets are to be enhanced. Running through all of this is a common theme: 'becoming a better person' – like a spirituality of desirable change. It is ironic that the most common participants' exclamation when they first behold the change is 'O my God!'

All of these programs presume that enhancement of quality of life in all its dimensions is desirable. Their focus is not exclusively commercial, and their appreciation by viewers is not exclusively hedonistic. They highlight people's spiritual and moral needs, even if the quality of what seems to satisfy these needs is sometimes questionable. In an age and culture that are materialistic and secularised, it is an important step to be able to identify a spiritual-moral dimension in action, since this can be a valuable starting point for enhancing this dimension in one's own life.

For people who are religious, it identifies the spiritual points where their beliefs can affect their behaviour.

The reality competitions

Big Brother, Survivor, Temptation Island, Bachelor, Bachelorette, Idol, Wife Swap, The Fat Club, Hothouse, My Restaurant Rules, My big fat obnoxious fiancée, Amish in the city, Boy meets boy, Dancing with the stars, Australia's next top model, Extreme makeover, What not to wear and the like offer a voyeuristic window on the behaviour of ordinary people put into an artificial 'reality' competition, or of celebrities put into an artificially competitive situation. These programs represent the 'harsher' side of reality television; they are what most people understand as 'proper' reality television. There are many variants: for example, *The weakest link* was a game show incorporating ideas from reality television.

The participants are easy enough to identify with. They are not reading prepared scripts, but they inevitably display the motives and moral codes they operate out of (or the codes they would like to put on show). Watching a program develop over some weeks engages viewers in processes of identification and moral evaluation. In identifying more with one participant than another, or in hoping that one will succeed while others are eliminated, viewers are judging the appropriateness of behaviour and morals. Feeling an identification with a particular participant is like a gauge of who you are and what are your priorities. The longer their favourite survives, the more viewers' personal valuation of the participants is validated. Expressing judgments and voting support for favourites is like a confessional statement. Viewers are articulating a moral point of view; they can enjoy kicking out the transgressors and they can delight that the 'solid citizen' wins.

For this type of program, the very name 'reality television' creates spiritual and values problems. For example, twenty-five women engage in 'behaviours' that increase their chances of being chosen by the 'bachelor' – and this before cameras for public consumption. Or teams on an island are required to perform bizarre endurance tasks. This is contrivance and artificiality masquerading as reality, hardly a window on reality. And it is a values problem for viewers who think the 'reality behaviour' will give them some clues for their own experience. Also, this format takes what would normally be trivial matters in relationships and portrays them as if they were matters of life and death; in contrast, what are normally weighty matters in the formation of a relationship can be trivialised and devalued. In an episode of *Bachelor*, one woman is totally devastated at being eliminated; she says she has 'nothing left' identity-wise because she had invested 'her all' in being successful in the competition. These programs display strange twists in values precisely because they make the valuation process into a sham for the pursuit of ratings.

Implied meanings, identities and values are plentiful in these programs and they can be readily teased out. For example, many of the contestants themselves have used the phrase 'survival of the fittest' to justify the choices they make in eviction or elimination. This implies that hurt and humiliation are a natural concomitant to the advancement of some individuals at the expense of others – not all can be 'winners'. This is also indicative of 'economic rationalism' where the painful discarding of some is just the natural cost-cutting needed for the economic advance of others. The 'casualties' are merely the unfortunate 'collateral damage' incurred while the 'just cause' of the successful and powerful is furthered.

One of the dominant themes in these reality programs is criticism and humiliation. In programs like the *Weakest Link* and *Shafted*, the humiliation is ritualised in game show format. It is puzzling why viewers enjoy the constant experience of participant humiliation and its associated emotions. Perhaps it feels good to see others, and not themselves, being humiliated. Why people can be interested in, and take pleasure from, the pains of others, whether real or fictional characters, remains problematic, and hence a good question to ask in relation to analysis of the media. Perhaps the reactions triggered are so basic and visceral that it is difficult to classify them – like asking why people enjoy food or sex. The German language has a word that identifies this emotion: *schadenfreude* meaning ‘taking joy in the misfortunes of others’.

Another aspect of the viewer appeal of these programs is the presumption that any ordinary individual could become a celebrity given the opportunity to participate. Perhaps this appeals to the secret desires of many who dream of becoming stars. In this way bored people can feel some sort of affirmation of their ordinariness when watching the evidently bored and boring *Big Brother* contestants on show in primetime television – with enough sexual titillation to keep up the ratings. Here you have ordinary people, not trained as actors or journalists, but who are prepared to give up privacy and expose a lot of their inner selves, becoming temporary television personalities whose lives in the ‘big house’ are discussed by viewers all around the country.

The public evaluations

The talkback television programs span a range of taste and quality. They include *Dr Phil*, *Judge Judy*, the various talk show hosts like *Oprah*, through to *Ricki Lake*, *Jerry Springer* and *Cheaters*. They are all about moral behaviour and relationships. Dr Phil engages in a type of public moral counselling. With Socratic questioning and a gentle confrontational style, Dr Phil seeks to get participants to review their behaviour and motivation; better self-knowledge, acknowledging rather than obscuring behavioural consequences, and accepting responsibility for one’s behaviour are proposed as keys to personal growth. Viewers can test their own intuitions, interpretations and moral judgments with those they see on the program; they are engaged in the diagnosis of personal and social problems – a diagnosis that inevitably impacts on their own outlook.

The Jerry Springer Show also evaluates behaviour, usually the more bizarre types; the displays of emotion, the aggressive confrontations between participants, accompanied by chanting from the studio audience, are hallmarks of its entertainment appeal. There is an interesting similarity between Springer and the imperial role at the ancient Colosseum; Springer deftly asks questions and makes comments that seem to guide the chanting judgments of the studio audience to either a ‘thumbs up’ or ‘thumbs down’ evaluation of participants. Perhaps it is not surprising that the title of Springer’s biography is *Ringmaster!* At the end of each program, Jerry sums up and delivers a short secular homily that includes personal advice on the problems displayed earlier in the show. An interpretation of the *Jerry Springer Show* is provided elsewhere.²⁰

As will be noted in more detail later, exercises in public moral evaluation in medieval Europe were carried out in church homilies and morality plays. Now similar moral discourse has become part of public television entertainment, subject to the usual constraints of its ratings performance.

Reality is stranger than fiction

This form of reality television is related to the *cinema verité* genre of documentary, where real life is filmed and presented without much commentary or explicit interpretation. In this stable are programs like *Real TV*, *Cops*, *World's wildest police chases*, *Police, camera, action*, *Worst drivers*, *Real sex in the city*, *Trauma: Life and death in the ER*, as well as shows on disasters and other miscellaneous topics like 'brides' (perhaps *Funniest home videos* also fits this category). For example, *Bridezillas* traces people's quest for the perfect wedding, even where this costs up to \$300#000 or more. This taps into the need for affirmation noted earlier – the brides need to feel special and unique, even if just for a day.

For programs like these, it is difficult to see what aspects of spirituality, if any, are involved. For their viewer appeal, they seem to rely on basic human curiosity about what is different, strange, and traumatic – as long as it is graphic and eye-catching. Perhaps this draws on the same curiosity and emotions like shock, sadness, sympathy and so forth that people feel when they witness some local traumatic event like a house fire or a car crash, or when they see disasters or crime reported in television news. Perhaps too, if television is always on the lookout for the new and the bizarre that might catch some viewer attention, it does not have to rely exclusively on fiction – there is more than enough bizarre reality that can be recorded and played back on the airwaves.

Real TV or not TV – that is the question!

Learning how to 'read' television's values-embedded content is an important skill needed by the discerning viewer. This is a more pressing issue the more that television becomes a touchstone for reality and a criterion for authenticity. Television is not acting as a spiritual or moral teacher; it does not claim spiritual and moral authority. But, to varying degrees for its different viewers, it serves as a publicly available practical guide for life. It provides life content that can be influential when it perceived as a window on reality.

While reality television seems to have passed its zenith in Australia, it still retained a strong presence in 2006, even though eclipsed in popularity by the forensic crime genre – *CSI* and its relatives. In mid-2006, *CSI Miami* was rated the most watched television drama on the planet; it has English, French, Spanish and German versions, with subtitled formats in other languages.

15.7.6 Meeting viewer needs and interests

Different sorts of story are used in films to meet the needs and moods of moviegoers: love stories, musicals, Westerns, comedies, murder mysteries, science fiction, action, thrillers, and horror stories. Some spiritual or moral influence may occur through meeting these needs, even if the level of influence is marginal.

15.7.7 Escapism and idealism through virtual journeys

One of the attractive aspects of watching story films is the opportunity to take a virtual journey to a place and a lifestyle that are different from what people are used to. This can be pleasurable escapism. For some viewers, the greater the distance created between the world of the film and their ordinary situation, the more they like it.

Alternatively, some of the appeal of film can be through its offer of a place and lifestyle that are merely attractive. Film-makers implicitly invite viewers to share the virtual reality they construct. Just how personally influential such viewing might be is difficult to estimate. At least, films give people the experience of virtual travel and provide them with initial information (and stereotypes) about other countries and other lifestyles.

15.7.8 The film as fable: Communicating moral messages

Films can have a moral influence because they are like fables carrying moral messages. The messages may be overt; or they may be implied, like the unspoken, presumed worldviews that were referred to earlier. The messages may be positive or negative.

Story films, like fables, have characters with whom people can identify. In this sense, popular Hollywood films have become the new international fairy tales of the 20th and 21st centuries. As such, they can contribute to the development of personal ethics.

15.7.9 Television drama and sitcoms as 21st-century morality plays

Elsewhere we described the public educational role of medieval morality plays.²¹ They were productions in the town square that helped medieval Christians sort out their moral identity. The various motives and moral pressures affecting them were often personified as characters in the plot. It was like 'Medieval Kohlberg'!

Given some familiarity with these plays, it is not difficult to see the similarity with many contemporary film and television dramas, sitcoms and talk shows. Comparisons with medieval morality plays can be a useful starting point for considering the *de facto* moral reference points that television provides for viewers.

The TV talk shows have brought moral decision-making into the arena of public entertainment. People's lives are under review – in public. Viewers can vicariously join in, comparing their judgments with those of the program host and the audience. The shows range in style from the sedate, interview journalism of Michael Parkinson, to the evergreen Oprah, through Tyra Banks and on to programs such as Ricki Lake and Maury Povich, which seem to trade on the emotion generated from past hurts; here the participants tell their stories with much scope for confrontation or possible reconciliation. From the point of view of television spectacle, some of these programs, like the long-running Jerry Springer show, highlight confrontation and in-your-face comments from the interviewees and the audience; vigorous expression of emotion is common. By contrast, the Dr Phil show seems to have successfully mastered the televising of individual and family counselling. Then there are the popular host shows (Rove Live etc.) and the late-night hosts like Letterman, Leno and O'Brien where the diet is a mixture of interviews, humour, music and variety.

The talk shows are good examples of what William Kuhns described as television apparently taking on functions that formerly were the province of religions and the churches.²² The talk show hosts are like contemporary high priests presiding over the moral discernment process. The *Judge Judy* program is like the old Catholic confessional. The penitent confesses sins – sometimes there is conflict in determining truth and justice – and the judge gives the penance; there may not be absolution but there is a sense of resolution.

Ongoing soap operas and sitcoms can also be interpreted as contemporary morality plays. The characters personify various moral (or immoral) approaches to life. It is not improbable that to some extent they can serve as influential moral exemplars for individuals who are gradually working out their moral identity.

This phenomenon also illustrates Postman's theory that television is trivialising human discourse.²³ An entertainment focus is now becoming important for perceiving and interpreting the proceedings of the law courts. The OJ Simpson televised trial, the videotaped evidence of President Clinton before the Starr Grand Jury, and more recently the reconstruction of the Michael Jackson courtroom 'drama' are examples of television taking over human discourse for entertainment purposes. It is not surprising then that election campaigns have also become ongoing television drama (or sitcoms, soap opera – depending on how they are perceived).

15.7.10 Film/television and the imagination: Learning through imaginative identification and imaginative rehearsal

In section 13.8, the role of imagination in learning and as a precursor to personal change was considered; this complemented what was said about imagination and intuition as components of meaning (2.9.7). That material is pertinent to theorising about the spiritual-moral influence of film because of its great potential for stimulating the imagination.

Imaginative identification and *imaginative rehearsal* are important parts of children's play, as well as of their learning through storytelling and reading novels. Film and television enlarge the scope for this learning significantly by extending the cultural territory that children and adolescents can explore vicariously.

Enhancement of people's cultural horizons is perhaps the single most important educational feature of film and television; they can make many emotional and value-laden issues more accessible. In turn, this can sensitise people to the values dimension in what they watch. In an educational setting, young people need to think about the nature and functions of imaginative identification and imaginative rehearsal so that they can be more conscious of their potential as personal learning processes that operate both in real life and when people watch films and television.

15.7.11 Story and imagination: The role of film/television in enhancing and diminishing the imagination

When someone reads a novel, the comprehension process is in a sense 'linear' and 'logical', beginning with the reading of a succession of words. The author uses words that will draw readers into the story, imagining that they are close observers of what is unfolding. Their imagination is stimulated to construct images of the action as they follow the story; it is like a computer processor converting the words scanned off a page to mental pictures and emotions for the internal screening of the story. When a story is being read, the imagination does a considerable amount of this work. A certain level of basic literacy is needed for this function and for the ability to enjoy reading stories.

When a story is told through film, the saying 'little is left to the imagination' is a good description of what happens. Not only do viewers not have to read the text, but they are presented directly with a wealth of visual images – the imagination does not have to work so hard. Does this stunt the imagination that would otherwise be

exercised when a story is read? Perhaps. However, the images in a film also stimulate the imagination by giving it many images that can be recalled – usually more imagery than the individual could otherwise generate unaided. Perhaps it is through this effect on imagination, especially through embedded, emotive images, that film exercises a subtle, relatively unconscious influence on people. This applies just as much if not more to television; the implanting of images seems to be a key psychological process in television advertising: it is not an appeal to reason, but to the attractiveness and desirability of images as an inducement to buy. The imagery in television stimulates emotions and insinuates itself into people's life expectations, hopes and dreams.

Warren described the media enhancement of imagination as follows:

Since the 1930s or so, with the development of radio, film, and television, graphic depictions of 'how things are' have become both increasingly accessible to all and increasingly vivid. These developments change not only the means by which reality could be imagined; they make the imagination of reality more tangible and vivid. The way an imagination of life is communicated has shifted dramatically – and I use this adverb in its literal sense.²⁴

When a book is read, a lot of *active* mental work and discipline are needed to convert the print into an emotionally engaging story. Film and television have a more direct, experiential way of doing this: viewers can become involved with much less effort, in a relatively passive fashion. This is why for most people it is easier to be captivated or distracted by film or television than by a book. All one needs to do is open one's eyes and listen, and be drawn into a story.

15.7.12 Media-orchestrated imaginations: How film and television can affect behaviour and personal development

This section develops the ideas introduced earlier on imaginative identification.

As regards change in behaviour and personal development, the imagination functions like a pathfinder or trailblazer by which individuals imagine what they could be like and try this out in advance before they make any decisions about personal change. This can influence their idealism by helping them explore the best possible world. Imagination can show the way ahead for personal change – facilitated by favourable imaginations and inhibited by unfavourable ones. Active imagination is a continuing experiment in self-understanding and self-expression; hence it is an important part of identity development.

While imagination is an intrapersonal function, its content is not completely determined by internal drives or emotions. Warren argued:

Overlooking such [social construction] processes, some prefer to ascribe imaginations of the self to psychological processes arising from the conflicts and dynamisms within the person and the person's emotional environment. Though one's vulnerability to certain imaginations of the self may indeed be based in the psyche, the actual production of various imaginations is less a psychological than a social reality, the end result of networks of persons and agencies seeking to imagine the world for the young.²⁵

This thinking has consequences for psychological theory about human behaviour and development, as well as for media studies. It complements the theories that ascribe power to genetically driven developmental tasks such as those proposed by Freud and

Erikson, and to theories that stress personal interaction such as Rogerian theory or Transactional Analysis. The impetus for change in behaviour and personal development can be energised from within the individual, but it can also be subtly conditioned by external cultural elements like film and television, which are not always acknowledged as socially constructed agents of change.

Imaginations of the self that originate from outside the person are important for identity development. Warren stressed the need for educators to look critically at the imaginations of life generated by film and television. He drew attention to the power wielded by those who construct these imaginations.

The stories [from film and television] tend to have a taken-for-granted quality to them; people see them but are in general unable to think about how they see them. During the teenage years, young people try on various imaginations of themselves in an effort to find one that fits. These imaginations are part of a broader project in young people's lives: they are trying to imagine the kind of person they wish to be, what their future life will be like, and the kind of person they wish to share it with. If the process of establishing an identity is in part a process of imagining for oneself possible forms of behaviour, possible attitudes and values, possible goals, and ultimately a possible future, then those who propose these imagined possibilities wield special influence.²⁶

An educational response to this problem seeks to help students learn how to identify and evaluate not just the imaginations of life presented on television, but the ways in which these are developed and marketed.

15.7.13 Film and television as sources of images, stereotypes and myths

Through their function as contemporary fables, but perhaps even more so through the images they provide, film and television have a great capacity for shaping popular myths and stereotypes. Through these, particular values and ideologies can be promoted almost imperceptibly. A prominent example is the gender stereotyping that affects the people's relationships. Attitudes towards homosexuality, premarital sex, marriage, divorce and one-parent families can be influenced just by the ways these are presented and 'accepted' on the screen – film reflecting 'reality' rather than a particular, constructed 'social reality'? It is more common now to have divorced, single-parent and gay or lesbian characters in television programs than was the case in the 1960s. The interesting question remains: Is this just a reflection of what society is like? Or does it somehow contribute to the development of a more general acceptance of these differences as normal?

Another example is the stereotyping of minority groups (see the discussion of Native Americans in **15.5.3**). Over the last century, films have contributed to the development and maintenance of negative stereotypes, and they have also influenced the breakdown of negative stereotypes.

The role of the educator here is to help young people identify the processes of myth-making and cultural stereotyping in film and television, as well as the ways in which these processes support particular ideologies. If these functions remain unnamed, their existence is hidden and their potential influence is greater because their implicit, relatively invisible messages cannot be evaluated. The myths and

stereotypes need to be brought out into the open where their so-called ‘reality’ can be appraised and their values scrutinised.

This sort of critical analysis is also important for evaluating the marketing strategies behind television commercials (see **15.10** and the discussion of ‘branding’ in **7.2.4**).

15.7.14 Role modelling: Film heroes and heroines

Film and television have a capacity to influence children and adolescents through the heroes and heroines portrayed on screen. But perhaps the influence is even greater through industry promotion of the star status of actors off the screen. Other celebrities also acquire star status: royalty, sports heroes/heroines and entertainers. The personal lives of the stars can influence those who emulate them as role models. The stars can be perceived as larger than life, like icons of individuals’ own romantic hopes – or fantasy templates for their own aspirations.

In one sense, identification with the stars can nourish narcissism or preoccupation with the self as centre of the universe. For example, numerous comparatively unimportant characters in action films are often killed while the hero or heroine remains somehow invincible, almost immortal. Viewers regularly take the emotional viewpoint of the main characters; hence the imagery of the indomitable hero or heroine can reinforce for viewers the importance of self and of preoccupation with their own concerns. What happens to others does not seem to matter so much – they appear less important and more disposable in the greater scheme of things. This imagery also supports a hope for immortality and protection from the misfortunes of life. It could be that this sort of identification is part of the reason people get upset if the star is killed in a film, and this is magnified when the star dies in real life. The death of a star we like or with whom we identify is a shocking reminder of our own mortality. These linkages may have contributed in some way to the widespread grief at the untimely death of people like James Dean, John Lennon, Kurt Cobain, John and Robert Kennedy, Ayrton Senna and Diana Princess of Wales.

Considerable attention is given to ‘identification’ and ‘spectatorship’ in the academic field of film studies. These refer to how viewers identify with screen heroes and heroines and project their own hopes with reference to them. Films are constructed to maximise the effects of these processes. It seems essential then that educators have a basic understanding of these processes as part of the interpretive background they bring to teaching and learning. They also need to be aware of both positive and negative role modelling – depending on the moral value of what is being emulated. It is always difficult to address the situation where young people tend to identify with the film ‘bad guys’.

While film and television provide children with ready access to a wide range of potential role models, this also probably helps them to become more discriminating about whom they see as worth emulating. A 1996 pilot survey by the British curriculum authority on values in education and in the community yielded data on the perceptions of different groups as role models for young people.²⁷ Children from primary and junior secondary classes commented on the results of a survey of public opinion given below. In all likelihood, their perceptions were influenced by what they saw on television.

Table 15.2 Survey of the community and of schoolchildren about role modelling

Question: ‘How far do the following people set a good example for young people?’

Results from a survey of the general public (%)

	Good	Neither good nor poor	Poor	Don't know
Athletes	73	17	8	2
Politicians	17	26	55	2
Pop singers	15	25	57	2
Religious leaders	48	25	23	4
Teachers	78	13	8	2

Summary of school students' comment on the above survey results

The written material by pupils was instructive: 337 students agreed with the results while 167 disagreed. They gave reasons for their opinions: 55 students thought that pop singers were better role models than the adult survey suggested, while 18 considered that religious leaders received a higher rating in the poll than they deserved.

The 500 pupils who wrote comments about 'setting a good example' covered issues such as knowing right from wrong, and doing the right thing in life (150); responsible attitudes and good behaviour (122); influencing young people and acting as role models (104); being law-abiding and not taking drugs (80).

The children regarded pop singers and politicians as setting bad example for different reasons. From 644 comments: *For pop singers*: association with drink and drugs (150); bad reputations, living wild abnormal lives (136). *For politicians*: boring, greedy, untrustworthy and getting involved in scandals (122); arguing and fighting (75); liars (45).

Thirty-four considered that both groups had a bad 'media image' which was not entirely of their own making; 389 noted that their information about politicians came from the media; 12 said it came directly from political parties; 193 thought the information they got was likely to be inaccurate.

15.7.15 The sensitivity of children to implicit messages in the media

Any media education, whether formal at school, or informal in the home, will need to work out what level of critical analysis is appropriate to propose to young children. Critical methods in interpretation can more readily be used with older children and teenagers. Young children are more impressionable and their personal defences are not so well developed; however, educating them in media awareness cannot be postponed until they are older.

One media skill that young children have to learn is called 'adult discount'. This refers to the ability to differentiate the *real world* from the *make-believe world* of film and cartoon. Before they learn adult discount, children's view of the real world can be populated by all the characters (animals and monsters) that appear on film and television.

Adult discount does not come naturally; it has to be learned. By the time of mid-adolescence, most young people have enough experience and interpretive skills to be able to make the distinction easily. But this is not the case for young children, and they are much more susceptible to transferring values and behaviour from the screen to their real life. Especially if they have no other strong spiritual input, young children

may learn some of their earliest and fundamental values from television. This is also a concern because it is difficult to change attitudes and values that are ingrained at an early age.

The educational importance of addressing the situation of young children was emphasised in the following comments from a religious perspective:

[E]nchanted by the instruments of social communication and [relatively] defenceless against the world and adult persons, children are naturally ready to accept whatever is offered to them, whether good or bad ... they are attracted by the 'small screen' and by the 'large screen': they follow every gesture represented on them, and they perceive, quicker and better than anyone else, the emotions and sentiments which result.

Like soft wax on which every tiny pressure leaves a mark, so the child is responsive to every stimulus that plays upon his/her imagination, emotions, instincts, and ideas. Yet the impressions received at this age are the ones destined to penetrate most deeply into the psychology of the human being and to condition, often in a lasting way, the successive relationship with self, with others, and with the environment ... any pretence of maintaining a 'neutral' position [with regard to the influence of mass media] and of letting the child grow up in its own way merely disguises a dangerous lack of interest under the appearance of respect for the child's personality.²⁸

15.7.16 Action films: 'cinematic adrenalin' and the potential relationship between film violence and violent behaviour

In the past twenty years the genre *action* film has become increasingly prominent in films made in the United States. Great sums of money are spent in their creation – often on sets that are exploded, crashed, burnt and destroyed in ever more spectacular ways. These are the 'cinematic adrenalin' films that appeal through the enjoyment of the vicarious experience of thrills, danger, excitement and violence – where viewers remain secure in the knowledge that they can walk away from the experience without physical harm. Such films draw on the same psychological mechanisms that operate when people ride a roller coaster or ghost train, watch spectacular movie simulations, or witness a car smash, a fire or some other disaster.²⁹

One commentator (the producer-director Joel Silver) claimed that the structure of action films was stereotyped – a sequence of recurring 'whammos' and 'zingers'. The whammo is the spectacular action (fights, car chases with multiple crashes, explosions, killings, eruptions, and monster appearances) that needs to come regularly and consistently during the film to keep the viewers involved and their adrenalin appetite on edge. In between whammos are the zingers – usually bursts of smart dialogue that make the viewer feel good or amused and help sustain the story line.

The prominence of action films is a useful starting point for considering possible links between film violence and violent behaviour in real life. The 'V Chip' approach to the problem needs to be appraised (access to inappropriate programs is controlled by a programmable microchip in the television). This debate also includes issues related to film classification and censorship. As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, a different approach based on enquiry and theorising is considered to be more

helpful in an educational context. In any case, it is likely that children would be better able to program the chip to their advantage than would many parents.

In theorising about this problem, there is a need to investigate some fundamental questions:

- Has the increased prominence of on-screen brutality come mainly from the initiative of the film-makers? Or are the film-makers merely reflecting and responding to the interests of the public?
- Why is violence an acceptable and popular component of film and television?
- Why can aggression and violence be inherently satisfying, both in reality and on the screen?
- Does screen violence stimulate aggressive behaviour in young people? Or does it reinforce and give a sense of validation to a tendency that is already there in some?
- Does the quantity and vividness of violence portrayed on screen dull people's sensitivity to its presence in real life?
- Does the prominence of screen violence breed a low level of public anxiety and fear for one's own safety?
- Does the constant screening of explosive damage decrease people's care for property, vehicles and the environment? Does it stimulate people to take pleasure in seeing things smashed and destroyed?
- Are action films relatively harmless, exciting experiences that can entertain people without any negative effects on them?

Exploring questions like these can occasion wide-ranging reflection on aggression and hostility at personal, family, community, environmental and international levels. It is not likely that students will come up with convincing answers and consensus on all of the questions. However, their engagement in such theorising can help them become sensitive to the problems and more positive about potential solutions.

What is said here is particularly pertinent to video gaming, which allows for a more 'interactive' engagement with screen violence (9.2.15).

15.7.17 The 'evangelising' purpose of particular film directors

Having been brought up with film and television since birth, many young people today develop an affinity with them as their natural media; they make up an extended world populated by film and music stars which serves as a prominent cultural reference point. Young people can spend a lot of time not only in watching films and television and listening to pop music, but in thinking about the world of film and music; what the stars are doing is of great interest.

For some, this interest in the media world goes further. They are familiar with the names of directors and producers; they know about Lucasfilm, Industrial Light and Magic, Pixar and other special effects companies that use high end workstations for cgi and digital effects; they are the ones who remain in the cinema at the end of films to watch the credits. Conversations with such young people show their familiarity with the evangelising purpose of film directors.

For example, one such group of young Australians, after watching Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator II: Judgment Day* in Berlin in 1991 (the German dialogue did not seem to impede their following the plot!) discussed James Cameron's

(the director's) evangelising purpose. They pointed out his prominent feminist theme of the 'strong woman'; the principal actress, who eventually overcame the bad terminator, wore sleeveless tops, showing her strong physique to advantage. The young people knew that she worked out in a gym for months before shooting the film to build up her arm muscles. This same strong woman theme was even more prominent in Cameron's earlier film *Aliens*, in which Sigourney Weaver played the heroine. Then they drew attention to Cameron's anti-violence theme: it was possible for the human spirit to overcome great evil – epitomised by the terminator as the supremely efficient high-tech killing machine – but humans have to use very aggressive methods to overcome this evil. The group then speculated on what the film might be like had it been made by other directors given freedom to recast the story according to their distinctive interests and styles. They proposed that Paul Verhoeven would have included male and female terminators having aggressive sex; Spike Lee would have made all the bad guys white and the hero and heroine black; Peter Weir would have had the terminator sit on a fence enjoying the view of wheat fields glistening in the sunset; and Woody Allen would have had the terminator say 'I don't think my mother would approve of this!'

While this discussion was evidence of a particular 'film-savvy' group of teenagers, it shows that there is educational mileage in promoting a more critical awareness of the intentions behind film plots. It may not be too difficult to enhance in young people the disposition they already seem to have to look more carefully into the purposes and processes of film-making. While this may be more effective with very intelligent pupils, most young people are still capable of preparing a reasonably good critique of film and television productions.

Any film and television studies that help students learn how to evaluate productions from technical, artistic, entertainment and other perspectives – such as values – will be an important component of their education.

15.7.18 An example film study illustrating issues in spirituality and identity

The New Zealand film *Once Were Warriors* (1995) has a level of graphic violence that would be grounds for caution about showing it at school – even though the novel has been studied in some senior classes. However, for adults, the harrowing story of the urban Maori family of Jake and Beth is a useful one for film study of identity issues. The approach to interpretation illustrated here can be applied to other films.

The French sociologist Bourdieu wrote about 'life structure' as a way of looking at people's lived-out identity. Observation of behaviour gives insight into people's self understanding – there is congruence between the two. This principle is useful in the interpretation of film narratives. Characters' identities are inferred from their behaviour and dialogue.

Other identity principles are prominent in this film (cf. Chapter 6):

- Individuals draw on various cultural elements (external identity resources) to shape and sustain their sense of identity.
- Other identity resources are more internal and personal (values and commitments).
- Healthy identity is firmly grounded in personal, internal resources.
- Identity problems can occur when individuals are too dependent on external identity resources. This is particularly the case where the identity resources to which the

individual turns are physically and psychologically damaging both to themselves and others.

In *Once Were Warriors*, identity can be used as a lens for exploring the thinking and behaviour of the main characters. From this perspective, Beth and Jake, and their three eldest children Nig, Grace and Boogie, are all searching for personal identity in different ways, drawing on different resources as they do so.

Jake the 'Mus': For Jake his self-understanding and self-expression seemed embedded mainly in interactions with his drinking mates. He liked to see himself reflected in the fear that other men showed when confronted by his aggression and awesome capacity to fight, and as the affable centre of attention when he hosted his hotel friends to after hours parties and sing-alongs in his home. The fearsome temper that was aroused when his macho image was questioned by his wife, Beth, suggested that no matter how much he might protest the opposite, he was not really happy or secure in the way he had become defined as 'Jake the Mus'. When drunk and antagonised, he brutalised his wife, but he seemed to avoid any acknowledgment that 'wife beater' was a component of his identity – this he could choose to ignore when he thought of himself as a genuine family man.

Beth: Beth appeared to love Jake and was happy when things were going well. But her experience of his brutality and his apparently greater commitment to his drinking mates than to his own children made her wonder whether she needed to break away from him and seek support elsewhere – perhaps within a traditional Maori community.

Nig: Jake's oldest son, Nig, found the social situation of the home revolting – particularly his father's behaviour. He left to seek some self-definition away from the family. But he found it hard to break away from the image of being 'the son of Jake the Mus'. He did find an alternative identity of a type, but it was with a tough fringe group called the Brown Fists, with their studded leather vests and highly tattooed bodies and faces; its identity was heavily invested in distinctive clothing, personal appearance and ritualised behaviour. His initiation ceremony involved a beating at the hands of the group and getting a 'patch' – a tattoo across his face. Jake is of course unimpressed with the tattoo.

Grace: Jake's 13-year-old daughter, Grace, came across as perhaps the most attractive personality in the family. She was gentle and friendly. She was traumatised by the brutality in the family but seemed to remain optimistic about life.

Boogie: Jake's younger son, Mark (known as Boogie), was removed from the family into the custody of welfare – fallout from his seeking identity with youth involved in petty crime, stealing car radios. The failure of his badly beaten up mother to make a court appearance was the factor that influenced the juvenile court decision that nothing could be done to rehabilitate Boogie if he remained in the family home. Despite periodic fractious behaviour, Boogie learned something valuable from the supervisor of the remand home, who became a mentor for his troublesome young brood. He showed them that the future of the deprived 'once were warriors' Maoris lay in cultivating an *internal warriorship of the spirit*. He encouraged the boys to ritualise their interior strength and courage in fearsome hakas – war dances as impressive as any by the legendary All Blacks. But he insisted that their energy had to be channelled into '*inner resources*', otherwise it would be wasted and misused in the spiralling violence that was already devastating the Maori community.

This philosophy, drawing on the Maori heritage, gave Boogie some sense of worthwhile identity and something to believe in. It helped him interpret the frustration in which his own family was tragically caught. It helped him cope with trauma when Grace committed suicide. She had been sexually abused by her uncle, one of Jake's regular drinking mates, during the all-night parties. Overwhelmed, she hanged herself from the tree behind the house before her mother returned from an unsuccessful search to find her.

Heartbroken, Beth regretted not following earlier her intuition to leave Jake and take the family (including Poly, Abe and the baby Huata) to a Maori traditional community in the country where she felt there were the spiritual resources that would give them more dignity and purpose in life. Later, both Beth and Jake discovered the abuse of Grace, with inevitable recriminations.

Beth then left Jake and with the remainder of the family set off for the Maori community. Jake remained unchanged in his established identity as 'the Mus'. Mark identified with the emerging spiritual strength in his mother. When Nig suggested to him that he too should have his face tattooed, Mark replied with self-assurance in words which were like an icon for identity and the key principle, or climax statement, in the film: 'I wear mine on the inside'. Inner strength was the belief or mantra that could give direction and meaning to his life.

The film portrayed the struggle of individuals for a satisfying self-understanding, self-expression and sense of self-worth in a subculture of brutality and oppression. The character Mark articulated one of the messages coming through the film: confronting moral degradation needs inner strength and values; like spiritual principles, they help with interpretation of the problem as well as providing the courage and motivation needed to take action to change the situation.

15.8 The culture of television: Its significance for the teaching and learning environment of the school

The writer and critic Neil Postman has a long history of writing about education and the media. In 1969, he co-authored *Teaching as a subversive activity*, which explored the possibilities for cultural change flowing from a critical, inquiring education. Then, in *Teaching as a conserving activity*, written a decade later, he proposed that education had a thermostatic function in society and that it needed to compensate for rapid social change by emphasising cultural conservation – concentrating on the role of handing on the intellectual, literary core of culture. This meant complementing and compensating for television, which had become the *de facto* primary source of education – the 'first curriculum' as he called it – as well as evaluating it critically.

In an earlier section (15.5), reference was made to Postman's book *Amusing ourselves to death*. There he argued that television, as with earlier major changes in communication media like writing and the printing press, changed the ways people experienced and described the world, and consequently how they derived meaning and values. He proposed that the fundamental *entertainment focus* of television has trivialised human discourse; many areas of life are now perceived and interpreted mainly from the perspective of a television entertainment culture. 'Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, colour it, argue a case for what the world is like.'³⁰

In a later book, *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology*, Postman proposed, along with other arguments, that there was a clash between the *literary culture*, which in the main still operates in school education, and the *television culture* in which children and adolescents are immersed. The former culture represents the world of the printed word with an emphasis on ‘logic, sequence, history, exposition, objectivity, detachment, and discipline’, while the latter emphasises ‘imagery, narrative, present-ness, simultaneity, intimacy, immediate gratification, and quick emotional response’.³¹ He went on to explain:

Children come to school having been deeply conditioned by the world of television. There, they encounter the world of the printed word. A sort of psychic battle takes place, and there are many casualties – children who can’t learn to read or who won’t, children who cannot organise their thought into a logical structure even in a simple paragraph, children who cannot attend to lectures or oral explanations for more than a few minutes at the time. They are failures, but not because they are stupid. They are failures because there is a media war going on, and they are on the wrong side – at least for the moment.

Not all would agree with the epic proportions of Postman’s picture, but the point he makes is valid and the relationship between the two cultures should be given more explicit attention by educators.

Postman’s interpretation is also useful for the distinctions it makes between teaching or learning styles: ‘Orality stresses group learning, cooperation, and a sense of social responsibility. Print stresses individualised learning, competition and personal autonomy. With computers the emphasis is on private learning and individual problem-solving.’³²

He wondered what the extrapolation of these styles would lead to, hinting that computer-based learning might raise egocentrism to the status of a virtue. He considered that in addition to economic implications, film and television influenced the ways in which people perceived reality, and that these were central to understanding diverse forms of social and mental life. He also stressed the effects of new media on the overall ecology of the learning environment – that technological changes in education were neither additive nor subtractive, but ecological: one significant change generates total change.

Surrounding every technology are institutions whose organisation – not to mention their reason for being – reflects the world view promoted by the technology. Therefore, when an old technology is assaulted by a new one, institutions are threatened. When institutions are threatened, a culture finds itself in crisis. The crucial thing then is how new technology alters the nature of learning. . . .

New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think *about*. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop. . . .

In conjunction with television, the computer is undermining the old idea of the school. . . [also] what is meant by religion, by church, even by God.³³

Postman’s hypotheses are stark. But they are helpful for confronting educators and the wider community with the changing circumstances of school students, and they can stimulate creative responses to the problems. Teachers who are more conscious of their pupils coming from a learning environment dominated by film and television

will better address the different ways they perceive life, judge things to be important and seek entertainment. This has inevitable consequences for learning and teaching at school. Teachers cannot presume that all children and adolescents will fit comfortably into the school culture of literacy. But they should not sell the literary culture short because it is still regarded by many as the part of cultural heritage for which the school is particularly responsible – a valuable complement to the media culture and also a valuable position for critiquing the dominant media culture. So the school would not only represent, and help to hand on, some of the literary aspects of tradition – the intellectual culture – but it should provide the context and impetus for students to become cultural critics of other major sources of input to their meanings, identity and spirituality.

15.9 Cultural agency: Action based on critical reflection on the potential personal influence of media

A critical evaluation of cultural elements like film and television can lead young people in the direction of becoming agents of cultural change – even in a small way that involves being more discriminating about the elements that they allow into their life-world for entertainment and education.

In his book *Communications and Cultural Analysis: A Religious View*, Warren drew on the theory of the Welsh sociologist Raymond Williams for his evaluation of the personal influence of film and television.

Warren considered that a principal problem with any evaluation of cultural elements like film and television is that they tend to be taken as *cultural givens* or *products* rather than as *cultural processes*. If accepted as givens, then they are taken for granted and not so accessible to analysis and evaluation. But if they are considered as socially constructed processes, then the production processes themselves are more open to analysis and critique. Hence those responsible for structuring the imagined possibilities of life as portrayed in the media need to have their work scrutinised. This does not mean that there is a subtle conspiracy in which media industry executives are deliberately moulding people's expectations of life in a manipulative way to support their market purposes. However, he noted that 'the specific imaginations are planned, produced and communicated, but the precise way they come together to create an overall sense of reality may not have been planned by any single person or group.'³⁴

For educational purposes, students can be encouraged to track the ways by which media executives orchestrate contributions to the fund of imaginations projected in film and television. Judgments can be made about the meaning and value of the marketed imaginings. The process critiqued here is not the same as the propaganda considered earlier; however, the idea of a subtle 'advertising propaganda' is not all that inappropriate when one considers the purpose of swaying young people in the direction of purchasing particular brand items to meet needs and interests. As noted earlier in section **15.7.11** on imagination, Warren called for educators, and their students, to *pay more attention* to this process and to evaluate the media imaginations that are being offered for consumption. This also acknowledges that 'needs and interests' themselves can be subtly conditioned by the media (cf. Chapter 7 on youth identity development as affected by consumerism and advertising).

Warren's proposals imply that the personal influence of film and television on children and adolescents is neither inevitable nor inexplicable. 'Whatever their complexities, they are social products whose production can be studied. From this

angle, influences operating through media such as film, radio, television, advertising, music and fashion become visible and able to be analysed.’³⁵

15.10 The potential spiritual and moral influence of television advertising

In commercial feature films and television drama and sitcoms (as with most content programs on television), the intention to bring about personal change is usually disclaimed. The nature and purpose of this material are different from those of propaganda and documentary film. When it comes to television commercials, however, the story is different. Supported by all the techniques and formats available within the film industry, television advertising sets out quite deliberately to bring about personal change in viewers – to increase the probability that they will buy the advertised products. This is making use of the expertise of feature film production for propaganda-like purposes. Also, as the logical basis for advertising is to provide information that will inform people’s consumer buying, there are links with the information-oriented purposes of documentary film.

One film critic referred to the successful 30-second television commercial as the pinnacle of achievement of motion pictures. Within that brief time-span there is a miniature film, with introduction, worldview, story and conclusion, that communicates a message to viewers.

The cryptic four-line advertisement for a motor vehicle in the daily classifieds is crammed with relevant information. The format is poor literature, but it is functional. In television the formats for advertising vary, from the simple to the grandiose, from the literal to the highly symbolic. Also, television commercials are not limited to functional information about products. Experience has shown that functional information may have little to do with the success of a commercial – it may be more about selling lifestyle images such as being ‘chic’, ‘savvy’, ‘cool’ and so on, with the advertised product being linked with those images.³⁶

What follows will look at television advertising from the perspective of its potential links with identity.

- 15.10.1 Image and imagination: Retail links with the subconscious
- 15.10.2 Retail seduction: Some perspective on advertising psychology and market research
- 15.10.3 The culture of advertising
- 15.10.4 Retail identity
- 15.10.5 Television commercials and the projection of images of unattainable perfection
- 15.10.6 The ethics of television advertising

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15.10.1 Image and imagination: Retail links with the subconscious

As one advertisement stated, ‘Image is everything’. Much of the storyline and emotional appeal of effective commercials depend not on words and information but on *image*. The commercial may project an image – say, of the modern, attractive, sexy, smart, successful man or woman – and will link this image with a particular product. The attraction of the image is intended to initiate subconscious associations with that product. Similarly, the commercial may seek to link the image associated with the product with the romantic imaginations of self that viewers might have. Here

advertising is more about selling desirable images than about the function of particular products – it is the images that have ‘retail potency’.

No doubt each product has a mundane function. But highly advertised products have also added mystique and social cachet. Television advertising (also in magazines and newspapers) sustains the ‘designer label’, ‘superior brand’ industry (7.2.4). Buying the distinctive label or brand is an identification process – and this is *retail enhancement* of identity. ‘You pay for the name’ and you in turn are ‘branded’.

As discussed earlier with reference to feature films and television, the appeal to the imagination is also a central part of television advertising. Images that are attractive to self-expression and self-understanding can be embedded in the imagination where they can affect people – with retail consequences. It is not an appeal to information or reason, but to the inherent attractiveness and desirability of the images. There is often a good measure of humour in advertisements and they may try to flatter people’s intelligence, but this does not eliminate their play on the unconscious.

This sort of critical analysis is important for evaluating the marketing strategies behind television commercials. In the commercial, within thirty seconds, there is an attempt to activate, and appeal to, images and emotions, desires and values that will be effective in prompting viewers to buy – and intelligently exercise their prerogative as well-informed consumers. The myths appealed to will range widely from a simple ‘enjoy’ to ‘look beautiful and irresistible’ to ‘caring’ and ‘environmentally friendly’. A study of the psychology of advertising is essential for critical media studies.

15.10.2 Retail seduction: Some perspective on advertising psychology and market research

Educators wishing to explore the potential spiritual and moral influence of advertising, especially on television, should become more familiar with the psychology of advertising and the market research that supports it. It is built on the premise that advertising can change people, particularly their ‘retail’ habits. Such habits relate to values and identity – as Karl Marx wrote, ‘As individuals express their life, so they are’.³⁷

One useful discussion of the topic is given by Warren.³⁸ While the example is now quite old, it is still pertinent to consider here, particularly from the viewpoint of what a contemporary study of the same issues might reveal. Warren analysed the 1970s work of the Stanford Research Institute in California, where market-research analysts studied the purchasing habits of households to guide product development and advertising. Using what they called the ‘VALS’ typology (short for Values and Lifestyles Program), they divided the population into four main groups, which included nine lifestyles based on people’s self-image, aspirations, and the products they bought and used.

The surveys set out to document what people thought of themselves in society and the distinctive patterns of buying that helped reinforce that image. With this knowledge they could ‘anticipate’ consumer needs and wants. They had already recognised that many in the community – the market target – had negative attitudes towards ostentatious consumerism and money as a measure of a person’s life, even though such materialism was by no means dead; they were dealing with an increasingly environmentally conscious and politically correct marketplace. Because people’s values affected their spending habits, market research needed to know these

values and how to appeal to them. In this light, they articulated the new ‘*central* problem in advertising’ as follows:

The central problem in advertising will be how to sell to values increasingly geared to processes, not things. Sales appeals directed toward the values of individualism, experimentalism, person-centredness, direct experience, and some forms of pleasure and escape will need to tap intangibles – human relationships, feelings, dreams, and hopes – rather than tangible things or explicit actions.³⁹

The VALS typology identified the following groups:

1 The Need-driven

This incorporates the nation’s marginal classes into two hand-to-mouth lifestyle groups comprising 11% of the population:

1A *The Survivors*: Those able to get by in life marginally and still maintain a certain dignity.

1B *The Sustainers*: An assortment of ethnically mixed gamblers and misfits living on the edge of society.

2 The Outer-directed

A category comprising the largest proportion of the population (68%):

2A *The Belongers*: Those strongly traditional and conformist, who make up the largest single subgroup in the VALS typology (38%). They get a job and tend to stay with it; they find a product they like and tend to stay with that.

2B *The Emulators*: They yearn to be achievers but they basically do not know how to make this happen; they tend to spend money on the assumption that one day things will work out happily for them (10%).

2C *The Achievers*: This financially secure group is self-assured and able to exhibit gracious but savvy behaviour in varied situations. They appear to know their own place in the social order and their own motivations and ‘drivenness’. Marketing appeals must attend to their self-assured character (20%).

3 The Inner-directed

The Inner Directed, fall into three lifestyle groups comprising 19 per cent of the population:

3A *The I-am-Me group*: This includes the somewhat angry, rebellious and maladjusted members of the community. They are bent on ‘doing their own thing’, even if it might mean they could be misjudged in the process.

3B *The Experientials*: A wholesome group of inner-directeds seeking ‘highs’ from jogging and other fitness activities like backpacking; they are inclined towards holistic medicine and yoga. (3A and 3B together make up 8% of the population).

3C *The Socially Conscious*: These are aware of social issues and involve themselves in politics. Concerned about the environment, justice, and about the misuse of power for self-interest; their inner-directed energy, while coming from self-awareness, is focused outwardly. Self-centred marketing does not appeal to them (11%).

4 The Integrated

This group makes up but 2 per cent of the population. It represents the VALS ideal: at the same time creative and prosperous. Examples offered were writers and artists who also run lucrative retail businesses.

Although somewhat dated, the VALS typology is a good example of the sophistication of market research and advertising psychology. Interestingly, it did not use the words ‘poor’ or ‘poverty’. It highlighted the link between lifestyles or attitudes and consumer spending. Related research was able to predict, on the basis of US postcode, an individual’s likely attitudes, probable household inventory, leisure-time activities, media habits, and consumption patterns for over 700 categories. It is unlikely that such research and market psychology are now less sophisticated than they were in the late 1970s.

15.10.3 The culture of advertising

Particular television commercials in themselves may have negligible spiritual and moral influence. What may be influential is the overall *culture of television advertising* – its omnipresence and the way it washes over viewers continuously. Some of the built-in assumptions of the advertising industry are: consumerism, competition, the importance of image, meeting human needs through purchase of consumer goods – all these project a social reality of materialism and self-centredness. This can create and sustain the myth that externals are important for individuality and identity and that particular consumer goods can always enhance them.

As considered in Chapter 7, promoting brand labels for distinctiveness of identity may be more concerned with economics and business progress than with human identity and welfare. Viewers’ *wants*, which may be more whimsy than anything else, can be appealed to as *needs* that must be met. Television advertising is synonymous with seduction. A credit card is touted as a key to a free and creative lifestyle – ‘with power to do what you want, and to be who you want to be’. In buying perfume a woman may be buying ‘hope’. In buying a deodorant a man may be buying ‘a powerful lure for women’.

For the culture of television advertising, self-expression is all about consumerism; individuality is about particular brands; freedom is about a wealth of options in consumer choice; and power is about the capacity to buy. Shopping is even proposed as ‘retail therapy’.

15.10.4 Retail identity

What is written here about television advertising needs to be linked with the discussion of youth identity development in Chapter 7, particularly with the notion of ‘the seduction of individuality’ and the commercial exploitation of young people’s ‘identity vulnerabilities’. The idea of ‘retail identity’ can be applied to individuals where a more than normal weighting in their self-expression and self-understanding is given to the purchase of particular consumer goods which have a high image loading. The driving force is their desire to participate in brand image and mystique. Retail identity is not so much a moral identity as a superficial one, coloured in with images projected by television; it is abnormally dependent on externals. The other

abnormality is that the purchase of consumer goods has gone beyond meeting functional needs and has assumed a role in providing identity satisfaction.

Television commercials extol the ideal of individuality while at the same time proposing that product purchase will give a ready-made identity solution – seducing them away from authentic individuality. In this sense identity has been ‘commodified’, along with so many other elements of culture, and it supports a ‘retail identity market’.

15.10.5 Television commercials and the projection of images of unattainable perfection

One commentator suggested that anorexia nervosa is a television disease. She claimed that in pre-television times it did not seem to be such a problem. The culture of television advertising (and in other media, especially magazines) projects through its models an unattainable perfection in appearance that can never be reached by average people (see 7.2.11).

For many women there may be a low level of frustration in not being able to look like the slim models with the perfect skin and hair. But it may incline them to buy cosmetic products that help them aspire to that perfection. But for a few, particularly adolescent girls, the love/hate frustration with this imagery may drive them to excessive anxiety about their appearance and eventually to the condition of anorexia. While television imagery may not affect young men in the same way or to the same extent, it can cause other body image problems.

15.10.6 The ethics of television advertising

When people think of ‘television advertising’, particular commercials come to mind. However, this is only a part of the advertising structure. To get a fuller picture, the question ‘What is being sold?’ needs to be considered. The most obvious answer is ‘Manufacturers pay a TV company to advertise their products’. This is true, but a more detailed answer shows that ‘The television company sells a statistically measured rating of viewing audience to the advertiser. It is *ratings* that are sold.’ In a sense it is potential viewers that are being sold to advertisers. Their viewing patronage, measured by regular ratings research, is the commodity of exchange. So while the perspective of the viewer is often ‘putting up with the commercials to get the program’, the perspective of the commercial television channel is ‘the programming is the mere overhead cost to secure commercial ratings.’

The responses of viewers thus have a significant place in the economics of television advertising. Viewer correspondence therefore has some power to bring about change.

The following example illustrates how viewer complaints were taken into account by a television network through its ‘ethics committee’.

In 1996, the head of the Viewer Services division of the CBS television network in Los Angeles explained to visiting educators the work of his section. It served as a watchdog over commercials and program content so that no inappropriate material was broadcast for public consumption. Members of the section were chosen to reflect different backgrounds (a teacher, a health professional, a parent). They were required to separate their own personal views and commitments from their professional role.

The boundaries to what was considered acceptable on television were constantly changing. The section also took into account comments from the viewing public. Letters to the network about their advertising and programs numbered many thousands annually. A different section had oversight of news and public affairs programs.

One apparent difficulty with the work of the section was the absence of any systematic set of values to guide their judgment. So in effect, the standards were set by what the viewing community seemed to be able to tolerate without making too many complaints. A frivolous comment was made that screen violence would be acceptable as long as it 'did not make people sick or give them nightmares'. So the viewer services were not really an ethics committee for the protection of public standards, but more of a lookout group to protect the network from mistakes that might cost them ratings and hence advertising revenue. They would counsel against content that might hurt ratings or that might upset the advertisers who were paying for their ratings slots.

Some examples of 'ethical action': The group reviewed content in an episode of *Walker Texas Ranger* in which the criminal shot two policemen in the police station before shooting an informer being detained in a cell. It was suggested that this involved too much gratuitous violence. The result: the edited version had one of the preliminary shootings cut. The violence was justified by the idea that the 'bad guys' had to be made look very bad so that, by contrast, the 'good guys' would look really good

Another example involved scenes from the soap opera *The young and the restless*. In one scene a woman said to another, 'If sex were like fast food, then there would be golden arches in front of your bed.' The script was checked with McDonalds (an important advertising client) to see whether they would be offended. McDonalds executives were not troubled by it – in fact they were pleased to think that the McDonalds' arches had achieved the status of national icons. However, in another scene, one actor threatened another with the words 'If you do that again I'll kick you in the McNuggets!' This quip was judged too offensive and was deleted without any need to consult with McDonalds.

If these examples are typical of television generally, then the ethical effectiveness of self-regulation might well be questioned. It would then be up to public opinion in the form of letters to the company to set the moral tone. How ethical television advertising becomes will depend on the ethical sensitivity of its viewers and their preparedness to take action.

15.11 Conclusion

The desired outcome for both adults and young people's investigation of the potential spiritual and moral influence of film and television is that they learn how to bring a more informed, critical background to their thinking about the media. This is not trying to protect them from the effects of the media, but helping them develop their own educated responses. While often superficially critical, many children and adolescents are relatively naive as regards both the overt and subtle capacities of film and television to affect their thinking, imagination and feelings, their liking for fashion and particular leisure pursuits, their potential spending targets, and ultimately their values and beliefs.

This chapter resources theorising about the spiritual and moral influence of film and television. The first step towards a critical school education in media is to engage educators in this theorising as a prelude to various efforts on their part to help young people acquire more knowledge and skills for critical interpretation.

Notes

- 1 R Eckersley et al. 2006, *Flashpoints and signposts: Pathways to success and wellbeing for Australia's young people*, p. 32.
- 2 The phrase 'sharing our story' has become a prominent theme in Christian denominational religious education, especially in the Catholic sector. This phrase, or a synonym, frequently appears in the titles of curricula, courses and books. See TH Groome 1980, *Christian religious education: Sharing our story and vision*; Catholic Diocese of Parramatta 1991, *Sharing our story: Religious education curriculum* (Guidelines for Religious Education in Secondary Schools).
- 3 ML Crawford & GM Rossiter 1993, The spirituality of today's young people: Implications for religious education in church-related schools; ML Crawford & GM Rossiter 1996b, The secular spirituality of youth: Implications for religious education.
- 4 G Gerbner 1992 The challenge of television, quoted in M Warren 1992, *Communications and cultural analysis: A religious view*.
- 5 Eckersley et al. 2006, p. 35.
- 6 This chapter was developed from three articles published by Rossiter in the journals *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* (UK) Part 1: 1996, 1(1): 52–67; Part 2: 1996, 1(2): 21–35; Part 3: 1999, 4(2): 207–24; *Word in Life/Journal of Religious Education* (Australia) Part 1: 1996, 44(3): 3–9; Part 2: 1996, 44(4): 6–16; Part 3: 2000, 48(3): 2–16. Reprinted in the *Religious Education Journal of Australia* (Australia) Part 1: 1998, 14(1): 3–17; Part 2: 1998, 14(2): 14–23. **[I've changed the style of citing vol/issue no. to what it will be in the bibliography]**
- 7 BV Hill 1993, *Is value(s) added education in the national interest?* (a discussion of the future of values education in the light of new employment oriented competencies movement in Australian education).
- 8 Usually, film-makers dealing with religious topics would want to disavow the purposes in the first two types, though this was not the case in Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*. But a blurring of the boundaries, especially between types 2 and 3, can increase the level of controversy surrounding a film, and if well orchestrated, this can increase its success at the box office. It is not unlikely that the makers of the *Da Vinci Code* took this into account in their marketing strategies.
- 9 We are indebted to Dr Rebecca Huntley for the information considered here.
- 10 D Pipes 1986, *Fundamentalist Muslims between America and Russia*.
- 11 N Postman 1985, *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*.

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- 12 A number of documentaries on George Armstrong Custer and the Little Big Horn, and on Chief Sitting Bull of the Lakota Sioux nation were produced in the 1990s. The most readily available example is a segment within the series *The West*, 1996, available on DVD.
- 13 B Nichols 1991, *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*.
- 14 Some examples of relevant writings in the area of film studies are: E Barnouw 1993, *Documentary: A history of the non-fiction film* (2nd edn); T Bennett (ed.) 1981, *Popular television and film: A reader*; J Corner 1986, *Documentary and the mass media*; D Cuthbert 1989, *Film and propaganda in America: A documentary history*; J Monaco 1981, *How to read a film: The art, technology, language, history and theory of film and media* (rev. edn); B Nichols 1981, *Ideology and the image: Social representations in the cinema*; B Nichols 1991, *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*.
- 15 ML Crawford & GM Rossiter 1988, *Missionaries to a teenage culture: Religious education in a time of rapid change*, Chapter 15.
- 16 These ideas were drawn from the documentary *American Cinema*, screened in 1995.
- 17 M Scorsese, comments made in the *American Cinema* documentary.
- 18 In a school education that attempts to develop pupils' evaluative skills, the activity described here may be as far into a moral evaluation in film study as the classroom education process needs to go, because the school itself already has a formal commitment to community values. This commitment carries through naturally with an implied judgment about the appropriateness or undesirability of any values identified in a film study, or any other study – as would be the case where values were identified in a novel or play. For example, there is no need for an exhortation to reinforce for pupils that the values of Hitler or Stalin were in strong conflict with the values upheld by the school and community. However, they would in all likelihood make value judgments about the issues, usually in their own thinking, but this could readily become part of an exchange of views in a discussion. In some individual cases, the study of a film, like that of a particular novel or play, could result in a significant personal learning experience for some students; but as noted in Chapter 13, this usually has to do with the particular disposition and situation of students, and it is not the sort of experience that teachers can and should plan for.
- 19 This material is drawn from ML Crawford & GM Rossiter 2004, *Spirituality and reality television: More than meets the eye*.
- 20 GM Rossiter 2001, *The Jerry Springer Show and religious education*.
- 21 ML Crawford 1991, *A history of Christianity: From St Paul to the Middle Ages*, vol. 5 on mediaeval morality plays.
- 22 W Kuhns 1969, *The electronic gospel: Religion and the media*.
- 23 Postman 1985.
- 24 M Warren 1992, *Communications and cultural analysis: A religious view*, p. 2.

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- 25 ibid., p. 3.
- 26 ibid., p. 2.
- 27 School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1996, Pilot survey on values returned by 569 school pupils from primary and junior secondary classes, SCAA, London.
- 28 Pope John Paul II 1979, *Children and the Media*, p. 46.
- 29 This is considered elsewhere in Crawford & Rossiter 1988, Chapter 15.
- 30 Postman 1985, p. 10. See also N Postman & C Weingartner 1969, *Teaching as a subversive activity*; N Postman 1979, *Teaching as a conserving activity*.
[Don't know whether I cut this last ref. by mistake: it was in the printout NO THAT IS CORRECT TEACHING AS A CONSERVING ACTIVITY]
- 31 N Postman 1993 *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology*, p. 16.
- 32 ibid., p. 17.
- 33 ibid. pp. 17, 18, 19, 20.
- 34 Warren 1992, p. 3.
- 35 ibid., p. 3.
- 36 Some Australian television commercials show products are used for a variety of purposes other than that for which they are manufactured, e.g. Sanitary napkins used for drying up blue ink, and blood after a shooting; toilet paper as a toy for dogs. For many cosmetics and deodorants the focus is on style and not function.
- 37 Marx, *The German Ideology*, quoted in Postman 1993, p. 21.
- 38 M Warren 1994, *Life structure or the material conditions of living*.
- 39 J Atlas 1984, *Beyond demographics*, p. 51, quoted in Warren 1994.