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Mediation: Pop Culture and the Classroom

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MEDINATION:
POP CULTURE AND THE CLASSROOM

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Professional Communication

by
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ABSTRACT

This manuscript examines theoretical and practical concerns regarding the use of pop culture items in educational environments. By utilizing an ideological social constructionist perspective, such items can be seen as reified objects of thought and power. This discussion considers the reification process, our growing control over it in an increasingly techno-literate society, a specific example of the process, and how this process and our control over it can be incorporated into the classroom. The intent is to provide both a theoretical foundation and practical suggestions.

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CHAPTER ONE

WHEN SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION MEETS POP CULTURE: REAL AND “REALER”

“It’s all real. Think about it. Haven’t Luke Skywalker and Santa Claus affected your lives more than most real people in this room? I mean, whether Jesus is real or not, he’s had a bigger impact on the world than any of us have. And the same could be said for Bugs Bunny and Superman and Harry Potter. They’ve changed my life. Changed the way I act on the Earth. Doesn’t that make them kind of real? They might be imaginary, but they’re more important than most of us here. And they’re all going to be around long after we’re dead. So, in a way, those things are more realer than any of us,”

Kyle, *South Park*, Imaginationland Episode III

The term “pop culture” refers to a wide array of phenomena. Everything from movies and television shows to games (both video and otherwise) and sports can be classified as pop culture. For the purpose of the arguments and analyses in this thesis, I will focus on the former (movies and television), rather than the latter (games and sports). This choice is based on design and my personal knowledge base. The scope of this thesis does not allow for an undertaking that would grant a fair treatment to all elements of pop culture. Thus, the emphasis will be on items that I am most familiar with, movies and television, and from within both a social constructionist and educational lens. It is my claim that the intertextual nature and vernacular of these pop culture phenomena can be extremely beneficial to the classroom.

Therefore, the thesis will examine the possibilities and applications of such concepts in the classroom. Likewise, my style will represent a direct application of the ideas that will be discussed. Chapter and section headings, as well as my overall tone, will demonstrate the ideas and source material discussed within those chapters and

sections. The intent is not to subvert or disregard the genre, but work within it to push and subtly play with its boundaries.

Similarly, the animated television show *South Park* that airs on the cable network Comedy Central often pushes and plays with the boundaries of its genre and medium. The program began with a twist on the cartoon, taking the oft-regarded child-like medium and making it “adult,” and developed into a narrative that satirized complex material in outlandish and contemporary ways. The episodes are most often created in less than a week, enabling the subject matter and presentation to be incredibly immediate and intertextual. For example, in reference to pop culture items such as video games, what little knowledge I have about the massive multiplayer online role-playing game World of Warcraft comes from the episode “Make Love, Not Warcraft.” That immediacy is what makes *South Park* a perfect example of pop culture with which to begin this thesis. In the fall of 2007, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the creators of the show, produced their most ambitious work to date: a trilogy of episodes about pop culture, imagination, and terrorism titled “Imaginationland.”

In the climax of the final episode of this trilogy Kyle delivers the speech I quoted, its irony emphasized by the use of the word “realer” in the middle of such an intelligent thought. Immediately upon viewing the scene, the words resonated on several levels, thus it is worthwhile to explicate each of these levels and explain their relevance to my work. I will transition from this explication into a “preview” of my thesis, as to best set the stage for the themes and organization of my chapters. Then, to sum up this opening section, I will give one final tip of the hat to this scene from *South Park*.

The most immediate way that Kyle's speech affected me on was a personal level. It almost seemed like the speech was tailored by Parker and Stone for me. In a way, I have grown up along side the show and its producers. As the number of seasons grew, so did the number of years in my age. As the complexity of their social commentary increased, so did my education level. Thus, the relationship between the show and me became cyclical. I took ideas from the show, improved upon them (in my estimation), and returned them to the show, only to be given new ideas to repeat the process, and so on and so forth. Perhaps maybe the relationship was more linear, since I never actually gave anything back to the show (or did I? I will return to this thought later). What is most important is the fact that the speech struck me as true.

The next level that struck me was that of a new intellectual. When I entered the Masters of Professional Communication program at Clemson University, I was given an entire new vernacular to learn. Associated with that vernacular were theories and concepts, some new to me and others not. Whether it was intentional or not by Parker and Stone, Kyle's speech was a direct application of one of the most prevalent theories I was taught in the program.

For example, in a seminal article, Charlotte Thralls and Nancy Roundy Blyler discuss three different "versions" of the "social perspective" on research and communication. On an important level, Kyle's speech is an argument for that perspective. Thralls and Blyler write:

Because there is no immediate knowledge of reality and because both knowledge and discourse are bound up with specific social groups,

communications are invested with meaning only through interactions of writers and readers in those groups. In short, socially mediated meaning—or, to use an alternative term, *interpretation*—is central to the social perspective. (4)

In his speech, Kyle has essentially compared contemporary pop culture characters (and enduring characters which are arguably more than “pop” culture, Santa Claus and Jesus) to social beings. At face value, one might scoff at the notion of fictional characters as social beings, but, as Thralls and Blyler prove, much research has been done on just that subject. What makes the excerpt from *South Park* so remarkable is that it explains the issue in terms that are so easy to grasp. Rather than simply declaring the imaginary creatures as social beings, Kyle contrasts them with the other actual social beings in the room, the people, and points out how the imaginary creatures have more of a social impact on his life than the social beings. It is impossible to deny how true that statement rings. Right now, where I sit composing on the second floor of the library, a woman sits three tables away. Unless I decide to do something drastic, she will have less of an impact on my life than the music streaming over my computer, less of an impact on my life than the fictional character, Kyle, has had on this thesis. You listen to that compare and contrast statement, and especially hear the word “impact,” and perhaps cannot help but agree. Even more impressive is the way Parker and Stone utilize Kyle’s individual perspective to make their point.

On yet another level, Kyle’s speech reflects the Burkean notions of orientations and terministic screens. Kenneth Burke states that every individual has an orientation

that is shaped by the events of his life. In his speech, Kyle is discussing just how his orientation developed. Fictional characters “changed his life...the way he acted on this Earth.” They changed his perspective. This idea is especially important when considered in conjunction with Burke’s notion of terministic screens. In *Language as Symbolic Action* he asserts: “We *must* use terministic screens, since we cannot say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another” (1344). Since our orientations obviously affect how we see the world, they must logically affect how we describe it, or, in other words, what terms we use. Thus, our orientations have a direct affect on what terministic screens we use and, in terms of work, to what field we give attention. Kyle describes the first step in the process of directing our attention, orientation building. These fictional characters built his orientation, his orientation affected the way he viewed and described the world, and his choice of terms affected what “field of vision” his audience paid attention to. And who was his audience? He was addressing a general at the Pentagon in order to convince him not to nuke Imaginationland. Needless to say, it worked.

The Ideology of Bugs Bunny and Superman

It is necessary to be more specific here, as it will be periodically throughout the argument of my thesis. Earlier in “Symbolic Action,” Burke describes the affect of terminology on our “field of vision” on a more in-depth level: “Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as terminology it was must a

selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (1341). Essentially, it is impossible to ever capture the entire essence of reality using terms (whether those terms are words, paints, musical notes, etc). Every time you select a term, you are selecting a part of reality (and thus directing the “field of vision” towards it) and simultaneously deselecting a part of reality (and deflecting the field of “vision” away from it). This notion is in line with one of three approaches Thralls and Blyler take on the “social perspective.” This approach is the major theoretical lens for my thesis.

Thralls and Blyler argue that “the ideological approach [to social constructionism] focuses on political issues downplayed in constructionists’ ways of conceptualizing community, knowledge and consensus, discourse conventions, and collaboration” (14). They go on to describe the approach for each of the conceptions they listed, but for my argument, I will not go into that detailed of a discussion, I will instead turn to the most obvious question: How does the idea of selecting and deflecting reality based upon choice of terms fall in line with emphasizing political issues? It is my contention that whenever we select or deflect anything something, we are making inherently political choices.

Of the several possible definitions of politics, I prefer, “the use of intrigue or strategy in obtaining any position of power or control, as in business, university, etc” (dictionary.com). The reason I choose this definition is that it is the only one that does not use the word “politics” or “political.” The key word within it is “any.” It opens up the words “politics” and “political” to be used on “any level,” whether it is a relationship

between a dog and its owner, or the chief dogcatcher in America and the dog population of America, as long as there is some sort of power or control being used or gained.

In other words, any time something is being selected or deflected, than power or control is involved. Whether we do so intentionally or unintentionally, when we select something, it necessarily gains attention. That visibility is a strong advantage toward gaining power or control. Similarly, when something is deflected away, it necessarily loses attention and is put at a disadvantage. Thus, whenever a term is used, it is necessarily part of the political process, as advantages and disadvantages are given to certain parts of reality over others.

In his book *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* Brian C. Anderson asserts that, essentially, the growing number of people selecting a conservative “field of vision” in the media (or pop culture) is shifting power to that worldview over the previous liberal “field of vision” that formerly dominated the media (or pop culture). He describes the change: “Conservatives have long lamented the Left’s near monopoly over the institutions of opinion and information, a monopoly that has enabled liberal opinion-makers to present their views as rock-solid truth and to sweep aside ideas and beliefs they don’t like as unworthy of argument. But as CBS discovered to its dismay, the Right now has a sizeable media presence of its own” (ix). The debate over the actual political bias is important, but beyond the scope of this thesis. What I instead wish to emphasize is Anderson’s tacit acceptance of Burkean concepts and ideological social constructionism. We see in his terms “present” and “sweep aside,” reasonable synonyms for “select” and “deflect.” Without even as much as a theoretical

wave, Anderson simply assumes that such selection and deflection benefits groups and ideas. How does he do so? By assuming the power of communication, media, and pop culture, as we all do. Or do we? And if we do not should we? Like it or not, it is evident that Bugs Bunny, Harry Potter, Superman, and Kyle are all selections of reality and thus ideologies (or perhaps tools of ideology) unto themselves. The question is whether this condition of these characters is a problem.

One Medination Under God

By now, I hope the meaning of the title of my thesis is becoming clearer. If not, here is where I choose to explain it, so you should reach some sort of clarity soon.

“Medination” is a play on three words at once: media, nation, and mediation. I combined media and nation in order to emphasize the effect ideological social construction has on a nation, especially our nation, where media is so prevalent. I want to point out that we are not a nation, we are a medination. In other words, I do not want to simply emphasize that we are a collection of territories and people named “America,” I want to emphasize that we are a collection of territories and people that are constantly communicating, and that communication occurs through media. (The definition of media according to dictionary.com is: “a pl. of medium.” The definition of medium is: “a middle state or condition; mean.” All communication is done through media.) Likewise, I also want to emphasize the idea of mediation, that these media get in between our communications and deflect and select our “fields of vision.” Medination is an attempt at a wide selection

with one term. It is especially important in today's world with so many media of communication being developed.

According to Anderson, the emergence of conservative thought is a “new-media driven” revolt and was “unthinkable just a few short years ago.” Some of the new media he mentions are the “blogosphere,” news websites, the growth of cable television, and talk radio (x). The uses of these media are certainly not limited to one political persuasion (for instance, the left launched a talk radio station entitled “Air America” in recent years). But once again, my intent is not to highlight certain political persuasions or ideologies (although I have already established how it is impossible for me to theoretically not do so). Instead, what I would like to point out is the growing number of media in order to couple it with Paulo Freire's theories of education and literacy.

In “The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom and Education and Conscientizacao,” Friere discusses a method of teaching literacy, language, and communication as more than a “technical action.” He writes, “Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables—lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe—but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context” (404). It is clear that Friere's conception emphasizes action over passivity. He wants people to “name the world” rather than “memorizing an alienated word” (402). This dichotomy is important. I return to Kyle's speech from *South Park*. Arguably, though he did not create the characters he used in his speech, he used them to “name the world” because he did not feel “alienated” from them. In other words, he became involved in the selection and

deflection process of ideological social construction. In this thesis, it is my hope that I can provide a sufficient theoretical framework for using pop culture elements, such as the ones Kyle named in his speech, to educate students in Friere's conception, better advantaging them to communicate in our mediation.

The Path to Follow

This thesis will be comprised of four chapters and a summary conclusion. The four chapters will build off of one another, culminating in the fourth one that will emphasize the classroom (or, more generally, the "learning experience"). The conclusion will act as a reference guide for what I have written. It can be read before the chapters to get a sense of what is to come, or it can be read afterwards to easily put everything back into perspective.

Chapter One will be a discussion of the Marxian concept of reification. I will discuss different perspectives on the term and how it has changed over time. More specifically, I will discuss the reification process, putting forward my own conception of the process. I believe this is necessary because, returning to Kyle's speech, these characters he named are reifications of the selections of reality of which they are ideological tools.

Chapter Two will be a discussion of network culture, techno-literacy, and the surrounding technologies that have developed. I will begin with a theoretical consideration of network culture as opposed to hierarchical or "top down" culture. Then, I will discuss techno-literacy, explicating its definition and importance within network

culture. My intent is to highlight the increased interaction between the individual and the process of ideological social construction.

Chapter Three will be a discussion of fan culture, specifically television fan culture, in relation to the fans' use of techno-literacy to more greatly influence the shows they love. I will begin with a discussion of the original *Star Trek* and transition to my personal experiences with the fan culture of the current popular show *LOST*. My discussion of *LOST*, however, will not simply be a recounting of what I have done and seen. It will feature examples and stories from the producers and writers that highlight the fans' strong direct influence on the show. My intent with this chapter is to provide a strong concrete immediate example of individuals and groups socially constructing the media that influence them.

Chapter Four will feature a theoretical discussion and an explication of practical guidelines for creating a pop culture or "media" literacy classroom. I will use several first hand accounts to explain the reasons for and considerations regarding creating such an educational setting. It is my intent with this chapter to provide both a conceptual framework and concrete advice for using pop culture in the classroom.

The final level on which Kyle's speech affected me is important to mention now. He states that these characters, these selections of reality, these reifications of ideology, will be "around long after we're dead" and that makes them "more realer than any of us." I do not think that Parker and Stone meant that they are literally more real than we are. Rather, I think they were seeking to emphasize what I am. The characters withstand the test of time better than any of us, increasing their chances of selecting and deflecting

some orientations and views over others. This endurance creates an imperative for us as educators. If these characters are constantly interacting with and influencing ideologies, we must construct a method to help students name them rather than memorize them.

CHAPTER TWO

LIFE IS LIKE A BOX OF...THOUGHTS: REIFICATION AND COMMUNICATION

“Picture a box. You know something about boxes, don't you John? What if I told you that, somewhere on this island, there is a very large box and whatever you imagined, whatever you wanted to be in it, when you opened that box, there it would be? What would you say about that, John?” Benjamin Linus, *LOST*, S3E13 The Man from Tallahassee

The term “reify” or “reification” is repeated throughout social construction literature. A topic sentence in one article reads, “An important task for the sociologist is to show that the construction of reality should not be itself reified” (Latour 179). On first read, the usage is seemingly simple. Reify means: “to convert into or regard as a concrete thing,” so the quote is saying that the sociologist should show that a construction of reality should not be a “concrete thing.” However this statement is not so simple. Communication seemingly cannot be a concrete thing as things necessarily have a materiality to them. Furthermore, the definition of reify explicitly says that whatever is being discussed, in this case a construction of reality, is “converted” into the “concrete thing,” a word that implies a process. So what is the reification process?

The same article mentions process in the subsequent sentence. “This can be shown by considering all stages of the process of reality construction and by resisting the temptation to provide a general explanation for the phenomenon” (Latour 179). Assuming the word “this” refers to “the construction of reality not being reified,” the statement appears to be explaining that by analyzing the social construction process (of which there are as many variations as there are humans or, at least, theorists), it can be

understood how something could become reified. However, if we return to our previous thought, reification occurs after social construction, or to social construction (“the construction of reality should not be itself reified”). This contradiction (reification occurring during the same thing it occurs to) must be reconciled. It is also interesting to note that the first sentence leaves open the possibility that other things can (and should) be reified.

Over the remainder of this chapter, in order to rectify this contradiction, I will accomplish three things. First, I will explore the historical roots of the concept of “reification,” focusing on the transition from its apparent first use by Karl Marx to its common usage in the field of communication. Second, I will utilize this understanding of the foundations of the concept to explore different conceptions of the reification process, ultimately explaining my own attempt at a conception of a satisfactory process. In this explanation, I will acknowledge possible critiques of my process and attempt to answer these refutations. Finally, I will frame this understanding and my process in relevance to my broader discussion of using pop culture in the classroom. As I discussed before, pop culture products are reified social constructions of ideology that can be understood and controlled if properly analyzed. In response to Ben’s question to Locke: if we were told about such a box, we should seek to properly understand what we are putting in and taking out so that we may best use it.

Linearity

The concept of reification’s most notable quality is its economic roots. Karl Marx is largely credited with the first major theoretical usage of the term. In “Part II: Money or

Simple Circulation” of his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the first notable reference occurs. In the passage, Marx analyzes the circulation process of capital, giving special attention to what it means in relation to the labor expended in creating that capital. He writes:

The first phase of circulation constitutes, so to say, the theoretical preparatory process to actual circulation. To begin with, commodities, are use-values by nature, acquire a form in which they *appear* in idea to each other as exchange-values, as definite quantities of incorporate *universal* labor-time. The first necessary step in this process is, as we have seen, the setting apart by the commodities of a specific commodity, say, *gold*, which becomes the direct incarnation of universal labor-time or the universal equivalent. (74)

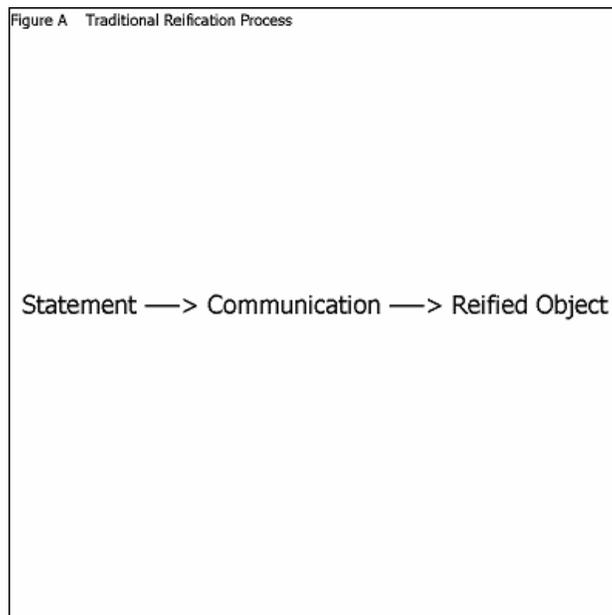
In this lengthy description, there are four important factors at work: commodities, use-value, exchange-value, and labor-time. The commodities are the actual objects, whereas the other three factors are intangible ideas. According to Marx, in order for exchange to occur in a free market, the “exchange-values” of these commodities need to be determined, rather than judged on their inherent “use-values.” It is important to note that “use-value” and “exchange value” are not material objects to be had or held.

Furthermore, the use-value of a commodity is extremely difficult to define. While you can define a thing’s use, its use-value is dependent upon the individual using it and the situation it is used in. Exchange-values, on the other hand, are, according to Marx, determined by the “labor-time” expended when creating the commodities because all

commodities require labor and time in order to be created. Although “labor-time” can be equally as intangible as “use-value,” it has the advantage of being a concept that we already measure: seconds, minutes, hours, days, etc. However, although clocks and calendars exist, making it visually observable, time is still physically untouchable.

In Marx’s description, a commodity independent of the commodities being produced and subsequently being exchanged must be set aside as the symbolic representation of “labor-time.” That standard becomes money or the reified object. Marx states that now commodities “appear to one another as embodiments of homogenous labor, namely, labor materialized in money...As uniform embodiments of the same labor they display only *one* difference, a quantitative one” (75). Two very important points to our discussion are buried in this quote about the purposes of the reified object, money, on commodities.

The first point is the linearity of the reification process as represented in Figure A.



In this example, Marx transitions from labor-time to money to exchange value. Labor-time informs money which informs exchange-value. Money is the reified object that represents labor-time in order for it to be given an exchange-value; so, in a way, money is an element of communication. It is, as mentioned before, a symbolic representation. Therefore, in actuality, the process we have is labor-time, then communication, then money (which is then applied an exchange-value). Communication is the vehicle by which labor-time is transferred to money. However, I would suppose that this process is not as linear as Marx would suggest. I will return to this point later on.

The second point has to do with the distinctiveness of the labor process. In his description of the reification process, Marx repeatedly uses the word “uniform.” The labor-time, though invariably unique, must be made to appear the same. Marx writes, “...all the peculiarities of the different kind of concrete labor represented in different use-values are completely eliminated” (74). In order to create a foundation for exchange to occur, it would seem that some amount of distinctiveness must be sacrificed. It is on this point that Georg Lukacs writes in *History & Class Consciousness* in which he applies Marx’s discussion of reification outside of the realm of economics.

In the chapter “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” Lukacs analyzes the concept of reification in regards to “bourgeois society” in general. He makes this move swiftly, immediately stating, “that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (83). This “phantom objectivity” is the same one that Marx

deemed necessary in establishing exchange-values in economics. Lukacs' point is that as money concealed the distinctiveness of the labor process, this "phantom objectivity" conceals the distinctiveness of "the relation between people," disconnecting us from our fundamental nature.

Lukacs breaks down the dehumanizing aspect of Marx's discussion, "...because of this situation a man's own activity becomes something objective and independent of him" (87). A man's labor becomes something that is not an intrinsic part of him, but rather an independent objective commodity: money, the reified object. He continues, "...the period of time necessary for work to be accomplished is converted...from a merely empirical average figure to an objectively calculable work-stint" (88). Rather than a measurement of the time a man has invested, labor-time becomes a standard of how much should be invested in order to produce a certain commodity. Production no longer becomes a process of seeing how long it takes a person to create a commodity, but a regulated entity into which a person enters. Lukacs describes it: "Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of the process; on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system" (89). Lukacs likens man to a "mechanical part" to emphasize the dehumanizing element of reification. Objects seemingly exist independent of people because once a thing is created it does not cease to exist, even if its creator does, until it is destroyed. In contrast, labor only occurs when a person decides to be laborious. Lukacs concludes this section of his discussion, "...this transformation of a human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanized and dehumanizing function of the commodity relation"

(92). What is important to note here is the shift of the discussion of reification that Lukacs creates. Whereas Marx emphasizes the commodity, as he was attempting to describe economics in a free market, Lukacs focuses on “human function.” He further applies this discussion to specific “human functions” such as law. However, for the purposes of our discussion, what is important to note is that when considering reification we are now focused on the human element rather than the commodity element. I would also like to note that Lukacs uses the same fundamental assumption of the linearity of the reification that Marx does. In his estimation, it occurs from human function to reified object. Once again, communication is the conduit through which reification occurs. We will continue to witness this trend as our discussion moves towards contemporary communication theory.

In discussions of communication in the workplace and in technical documents, several thinkers echo the ideas of Lukacs and, to a lesser extent, Marx. In their article “The Environmental Impact Statement and the Rhetoric of Democracy,” Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer specifically emphasize this point: “The reifying function of objectification allows all potential impacts to be leveled and plugged into formulas...The EIS predicts that in the ‘short term’...*jobs* lost will be restored, but of course any reader knows that many of those *people* who hold the jobs at the time the EIS is written will be dead by the time their jobs are restored” (181). This scenario is almost exactly what Lukacs described in his discussion of reification. By reifying labor-time as jobs and not as people, the report writer separated the actual people the policy would affect from the effects of the policy. Especially interesting to note is the order in which

Killingsworth and Palmer implicitly, and perhaps unknowingly, explain this sequence of events as occurring: “the reifying function of objectification” not, as Lukacs and Marx both described it, the objectifying function of reification. Thus, we are forced to ask which order is correct: does reification create the object or does the object create reification? In Killingsworth and Palmer’s defense, gold certainly existed before it was reified, but, in Marx’s defense, it arguably did not have any link to labor-time before we reified it and was thus valueless. Stephen Katz’s article “The Ethic of Expediency” features a similar discussion of objectifying human relation through reification.

Though it is not explicit in his article, Katz’s analysis of Just’s Holocaust memo for a more efficient method of extermination of the Jewish people reflects Lukacs’ discussion. Katz describes the the memo as: “...cold-blooded methodology... systematically ‘processing’ hundreds of thousands of ‘pieces a day’” (265). He claims that an ethic of expediency “at least partially formed the moral basis for the Holocaust” and that basis is reflected in Just’s memo (262). Similarly, Marx’s and Lukacs’ views of reification factored into that ethic are reflected in Katz’s analysis. As Lukacs stated, reification moves people away from human relations. Katz describes almost the exact same phenomenon in regards to the Holocaust. The Jewish people, as exhibited in Just’s memo, were treated as objects and not human beings. Similar to Marx’s discussion, in order to efficiently exchange commodities, they must be reified into similarly measured values. In order to efficiently exterminate the Jewish people (as well as many many others), they first had to be reified into similarly measured values. It is interesting to note how the process Katz implicitly describes seems to be completely in line with the linear

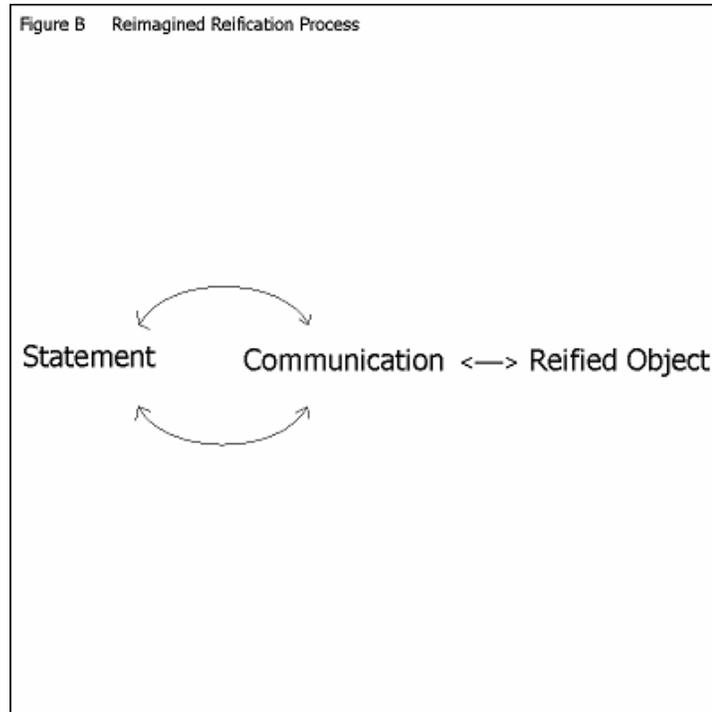
reification process: from the human element, to communication, to reified object. It is interesting to consider how much this reification of the Jewish people into objects changed communication concerning them and further dehumanized them in the minds of the Nazis. This simultaneous move of implicitly utilizing Marx's conception of reification yet straying from the strict linearity of it is also demonstrated in two articles about the social construction of science.

Cyclical

We can examine Bruno Latour and Steven Woolgar's "Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts" to see the reification process they are implicitly assuming as they discuss a Marxist version of the concept. Similarly, Dorothy A. Winsor discusses the social construction of science and scientists in seemingly Marxian terms within the specific lens of engineering.

In Latour and Woolgar's discussion, the exchange-value that must be given an equal measuring system is credibility. A scientist's credibility directly affects what research he is allowed to do and what jobs he can hold. Latour and Woolgar state: "The essential feature of this cycle is the gain of credibility which enables reinvestment and the further gain of credibility. Consequently, there is no ultimate objective to scientific investment other than the continual redeployment of accumulated resources. It is in this sense that we liken scientists' credibility to a cycle of capital investment" (198). The scope of the reification process is broadened in this quote. Two key words signal this broader perspective and challenged the apparent linearity of the process: cycle and

redeployment. Essentially, what Latour and Woolgar have done is turned the process back in on itself. This redefinition is exhibited in Figure B.



The relationship between the reified object and communication becomes two-way. No longer is the goal to simply create the object, to create money to be used in the different setting of trade. It is to create fuel to feed back in the fire to sustain the process. Latour and Woolgar describe how credibility is used both in a linear fashion by scientists, and how it is used in this newer nonlinear fashion.

Winsor seeks to explain how engineers not only attempt to create a concrete exchange-value of their own work in the field of engineering, but simultaneously attempt to position themselves within the field, a task that means their work affects them as much as they affect it. She discusses several steps in the construction of an engineering document, both individual and collaborative, in order to demonstrate how the process is

not as empirical as we might believe. Most relevant to our discussion, she explicates how documents, reified objects, are turned back onto the process used to create them, "...the documents justify decisions already made, but are written as though they are the basis of the decision and would logically come before it, not after it" (66). This idea is the same one discussed in relation to Katz's analysis of Just's Holocaust memo. The document is originally seemingly created to convince someone to do or believe something. But, once it is created, its tangibility seems to be proof that whatever assertion it contains is true. Thus, the document, the reified object, is turned back on the process. It becomes evidence for the communication process to create another reified object even though that communication process appeared to create it in the first place. This process is described in more detail by Latour and Woolgar.

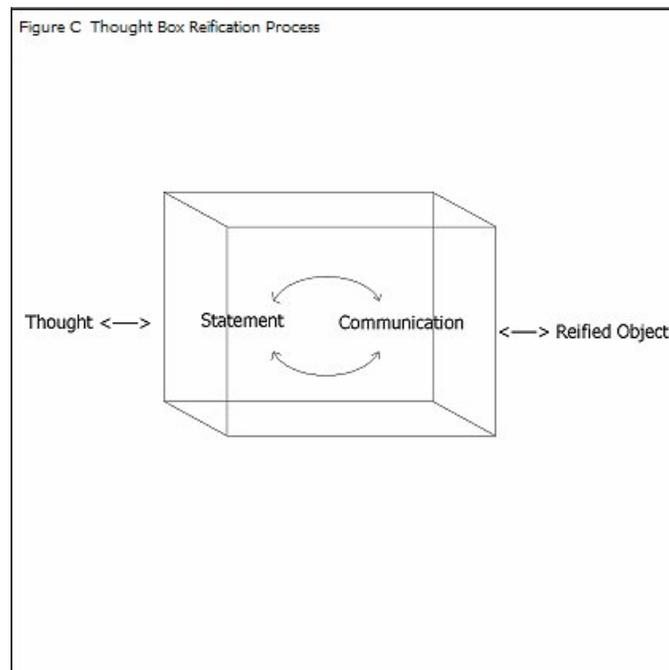
Using the terms "split entity" and "inversion," Latour and Woolgar speak to the cyclical nature of the reification process. Amidst their discussion of how scientists create an exchange-value for credibility, they tap into the notion of "facts" and "artifacts." It is in this section where they mention the split entity: "*The statement becomes a split entity. On the one hand, it is a set of words which represents a statement about an object. On the other hand, it corresponds to an object in itself which takes on a life of its own*" (176). The split entity is the communication and the object it creates. However, the whole notion of describing the "entity" as becoming split acknowledges that it was at once a whole "entity." In other words, the process that supposedly creates the reified object, is, according to Latour and Woolgar, part of the reified object. They cannot be separated as they are one and the same. They go on to describe this phenomenon as inversion, "an

inversion takes place: the object becomes the reason why the statement was formulated in the first place” (177). This quote is almost exactly what Winsor wrote in her piece. The cyclical nature of the process is apparent. The object seemingly becomes the reason the statement was formulated, just as, in Marx’s original economic discussion, money seemingly becomes the reason labor-time was invested. It is my intent to further highlight this cyclical nature of the reification process in order to emphasize the two “ends” of it, the human end of it and the object end of it.

The Thought Box

You may have already noted a contradiction between my diagrams and my discussion, especially when Lukacs’ discussion was integrated into ours. The diagrams I have created begin with the word “statement,” whereas all other reification processes begin with, as Lukacs explicitly states, “human relations.” The reason I have created the diagrams in this way is two fold: to focus on the transition of reification while challenging the linearity of it, and to highlight the objectifying nature of previous discussions of reification. Marx’s discussion of reification transitioned from labor-time (a “statement” made by the people performing labor) to money, the reified object. Katz’s discussion transitioned from the memo (a “statement” made by Just) to concrete actions and devices created by the Nazis. Implicitly, all these discussions have acknowledged the human element, but it is not until Latour and Woolgar that we fully see a concept we can use to integrate the human element.

In order to describe my thought box conception of the reification process, I would like to utilize Latour and Woolgar's definition of an idea as a representation of "a summary of a complicated material situation" (170). While I realize that this definition does not completely fulfill our goal to incorporate a human element into the process, I hope we can at least agree that individuals come up with ideas through thought and thus an idea is a representation of an individual's thought process. However, the intent of my discussion is not to describe the complexities of the thought process, so I will simply say that the end of the thought process, or thinking, is an idea or a thought. I now refer you to Figure C.



In Figure C, you can see how the beginning of the diagram has been moved to the inside of a box. "Thought" is now used to "begin" the process. On the opposite end of the diagram, the reified object remains as the "end" of the process. In a way, I have preserved the original linearity of the process, though I would like to take note of the

double-sided arrows in between “thought” and the box and the “reified object” and the box. Though thought is put into the box, it is not unaffected by the process. The same can be said for the reified object though it is the output of the box. Why, then, did I not put all of the terms inside of the boxes with arrows pointed in every direction? While it would be easiest to say that such a diagram would be inefficient for understanding, my design designs can be described through a final return to Latour and Woolgar’s description of the process.

To emphasize their stark contrast from one another, I wish to highlight the two ends of the reification process. This highlighting is necessary because the contrast creates the illusion that the ends are completely separate from one another. Latour and Woolgar observe this divergence as when a “fact,” their reified object, moves outside the work of scientists, “observation of laboratory activity shows that the ‘outside’ character of a fact is itself the *consequence* of the laboratory work....we observed the *extension* of some laboratory practices to other arenas of social reality, such as hospitals and industry” (182). The “end” of the process is important to highlight because it is taken from one context to another. However, the reason I have used the double sided arrow in between the end and the box is that once the reified object is moved to that other context, by human relations, it is then put back into the box. Thus, you can see why I chose to highlight the beginning and the end. It is my intent to emphasize the reification process and its switch between contexts. This emphasis is reflected in the *LOST* quote used to begin this chapter.

Part of the appeal of the fantasy aspect of *LOST* is how elements of the characters life before they crashed on the island starkly contrast with the island setting. In one episode, a pet cat a character once encountered walks through the jungle. The image of such a domesticated animal roaming through the jungle is jarring. In the episode I quote, Benjamin Linus, a man who seemingly understands the island, tries to explain to John Locke, a man desperately trying to understand the island, how this process works. He describes a magic box, an item that emphasizes the input and output notion. Essentially, an individual puts a thought into the box and it “creates” the object much like Peter Venkmen thinking of the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man in the original Ghostbusters movie created a giant version of the creature. I conceptualize the reification process in the same way, except that I exchange the word “magic” for “thought.” By highlighting the fact that we put into it, I am almost highlighting the fact that we are directly responsible for output of it. Next, I would like to discuss a possible critique or misunderstandings of my depiction of the reification process, so as to not misrepresent it.

The Brig

“The magic box is a metaphor, John. I can’t show you anything until you can show me that you’re ready and willing to be one of us. When people join us here on this island, they need to make a gesture of free will, of commitment,” Benjamin Linus, *LOST*, S3E19

Five days following Ben’s description of the box to Locke in storyline time, he sends Locke out into the jungle to complete a task in order to demonstrate his understanding of the purpose of the metaphor. Locke’s task is a cleansing of sorts. He must clear his mind, or so Ben says he does, in order to truly understand the metaphor of

the box. Likewise, before dealing with any implications of the thought box process, we must first be aware of its identity as a metaphor. Thus, I will examine this process through the lens of the article “Metaphors of Communication and Organization” by Linda L. Putnam, Nelson Phillips, and Pamela Chapman.

Putman, Phillips, and Chapman put forward a list of seven metaphors of communication. They position their discussion in relevance to the organization and communication, but I suppose that the metaphors are as relevant to non-organization communication. However, it is important to note that not only is it arguably impossible to communicate without organization, but that reified objects are important building blocks for organizations, as clearly witnessed through all of the articles I have already discussed. A specific example would be how the reification process surrounding Just’s memo further solidified the organization commonly know as the “Nazis.”

Putman, Phillips, and Chapman explain that their purpose for examining each of the metaphors is to “...reveal alternative ways of thinking about the origin and nature of organizing, its process, and the constructs that form its ontological roots” (377). My purpose then, is the same or, at least, to apply their different metaphors to our discussion to openly highlight weaknesses and strengths of my process.

The metaphor of the box is most completely reflected in the conduit metaphor. Putnam, Phillips, and Chapman state that the metaphors treats “...organizations as containers for amount, type, direction, and structure of information flow” (378). This description brings about two important points. First, the metaphor of the box seemingly begs to be tied to a concrete organization. If the process is an input and output, it must be

contained somewhere measurable. This perspective, ironically, reifies the process. The second point is reflected in the following quote from the article that the conduit metaphor treats “communication as an object that flows from a source to a receiver” (380). This view reduces the human element of the process that I am attempting to emphasize by increasing the object element. In it, the thought is released into the box and flows through it unchanged until it is released out the other side, a reified object. However, the thought is not a reified object before it enters the box, so it must undergo some sort of change in the box. Something must be added in order for it to become concrete. Thus, while the notion of the box as a container has some positive implications (usually a thought is reified because some organization has a reason to do so, thoughts are put out and reified objects come out), it is not entirely suitable for the thought box. It is necessary to use another of Putnam, Phillips, and Chapman’s metaphors to more completely explain my process.

I wish to point out the metaphor of voice. Putnam, Phillips, and Chapman explain that the metaphor has “...an interest in the practices and structures that affect who can speak, when, and in what way” (389). This element of the metaphor is demonstrated in Ben’s interactions with Locke. Locke was first allowed to be told about the metaphor because his knowing about it served some purpose for Ben’s group that Locke was not yet “one of.” Later, when Locke wants to know more about it, Ben shuts him out, claiming he needs to demonstrate his readiness to have access to it. Putnam, Phillips, and Chapman further explain that the metaphor “...centers on implicit factors that shape the role of communication, namely, ideology, hegemony, legitimation to speak, and

unobtrusive control” (391). These factors are what I would like to highlight about the thought box process. While the thought is put into the box and then comes out as a reified object, neither of those steps, nor the transformative step in the middle, occurs “cleanly” as the conduit metaphor would suggest. What is added “inside” of the box are the factors mentioned in the description of the voice metaphor. Further utilizing Katz’s example of Just’s memo, what is added in the process in that case is, among other things, the voice of the privileged Nazis and what is missing in the process is the voice of the oppressed (most notably those people being exterminated). So, while the process is occurring in a container, that container has extremely permeable walls and an open top that allows factors to push and shape the thought as it is transformed into a reified object. Let us also not forget that in many cases, a reified object is not an output without reason because objects are usually created to be used. If there were no advantage to reification, it would not be performed. The reason for output may not be conscious on the part of the person using the reified object, but I would venture that it is probably observable based upon analysis of how the object is used. I will consider that analysis in the final section of this chapter.

The Man Behind the Curtain

“I know I promised to tell you everything, John, and I wish it was as simple as me taking out a dusty old book and opening it up...but it’s not that simple,” Benjamin Linus, *LOST*, S3E20

His task completed, Locke marches back into Ben’s camp and demands the answers he has been promised. He wants to know the nature of the island and his

connection to it all. Ben, partially shocked that Locke was able to accomplish the task, bemoans his inability to truly tell of the secrets of the island. In his seemingly concise statement, Ben is dancing around the general discussion of nature of communication and the specific discussion of reification. Early 20th century thinker John Dewey described the difficulty in a more direct manner in his book *Experience and Nature*:

When communication occurs, all natural events are subject to reconsideration and revision; they are re-adapted to meet the requirements of conversation, whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse deemed thinking. Events turn into objects, things with a meaning. They may be referred to when they do not exist, and thus be operative among things distant in space and time, through vicarious presence in a new medium. (166)

Originally published in 1925, this excerpt from Dewey's book describes the phenomenon eloquently, transitioning from a social constructionist stand point to the reification of events to those reified objects existing in a new medium. It also subtly acknowledges the problems with communication in this view while simultaneously expressing the value of it. Through "reconsideration" and "revision," events become objects that are referred to in communication, even when they do not exist. It certainly seems foolish to refer to events as objects, especially when they do not exist, and in contexts when they do not seem relevant. However, through my discussion of the reification process I hope I have demonstrated how this transition occurs.

Earlier, I mentioned how that something had to be added to the human input while it is in the thought box in order for it to become an object. Dewey makes references to this idea with the phrase “things with meaning.” While I admit that it can be argued that all things necessarily have meaning (be it use-value, exchange-value, or something more complex), I do not believe that idea is what Dewey is driving at with the phrase. Earlier in the quote he states that events are “re-adapted to meet the requirements of conversation.” This re-adaptation is how meaning is injected as the events are changed (because adaptation is certainly a type of change) to comply with differing standards. In other words, an event is taken from its original context and inserted into a new one. How can change not occur? It must and Dewey describes how. In summary, I would like to tie these ideas to my broader discussion of pop culture and the classroom.

In a later work titled *Democracy and Education*, Dewey discusses meaning in social contexts in relevance to what ought to be taught. He claims: “There is a need of special selection, formulation, and organization in order that they [the materials being taught] may be adequately transmitted to the new generation. But this very process tends to set up subject matter as something of value just by itself...” (192). This emphasis of social contexts and non-independent value of materials parallels my discussion of reification. Coupled with the earlier Dewey excerpt regarding objects in their meaning, we can see how it is important to not only teach about the objects, but how the objects are changed and shaped to fit into new contexts. What is important to consider is how this changing and shaping occurs contemporarily.

In their article “The Status of the Object: Performances, Mediations, and Techniques” Dick Pels, Kevin Hetherington, and Frederic Vandenberghe discuss the role of the object society in light of reification, “...it was perhaps time that we noticed once again the sensuous immediacy of the objects we live, work, and converse with, in which we routinely place our trust, which we love and hate, which bind us as much as we bind them” (1). There are no objects that are more representative of that immediacy, and the love, hate, and binding that occurs along with it, than those objects that comprise pop culture. They are the reified objects, both tangibly and intangibly, with which we, and especially the “new generation” interact most. If the analysis of the use of these objects is encouraged, then we will be able to see them, with the immediacy mentioned by Pels, Hetherington, and Vandenberghe, not for their use as exchange-values, but human creations. Then, the inherent ideology behind those objects can be understood, allowing for further input into this cyclical process.

Upon completion of his assigned task and subsequent return to Ben, Locke thought he could be told about the island rather than seeking to understand it through his own process. As students and educators, we have to ask ourselves if we want to identify with Locke, a character whose greatest weakness is his need for an authority figure to approve of him, or if we want to forge our own path through the island jungle, seeking to understand the significance of seemingly random landmarks such as the pirate ship named the Black Rock, the abandoned van in the woods, and the four toed statue. In the next chapter, I will discuss how technology helps us become the latter type of explorer in our “jungle.”

CHAPTER THREE

DEAL OR NO DEAL: NETWORK CULTURE AND TECHNO-LITERACY

“To Our Fellow Members,
We have a tentative deal.

It is an agreement that protects a future in which the Internet becomes the primary means of both content creation and delivery. It creates formulas for revenue-based residuals in new media, provides access to deals and financial data to help us evaluate and enforce those formulas, and establishes the principle that, ‘When they get paid, we get paid.’”
Patric M. Verrone President WGAW and Michael Winship President WGAE, Letters
From The Presidents With Deal Summary

On the morning of February 9th, 2008, the presidents of the Western and Eastern branches of the Writers Guild of America released a statement to their constituents regarding a tentative deal that was reached with the studios the previous day. That letter began with the paragraph that I have quoted above. What I do not wish to focus on is the logistics of the writers’ strike. It is of no relevance to our discussion here. What is relevant is the presidents’ assumptions about the internet.

The presidents write that they are protecting a future “in which the Internet becomes the primary means of both content creation and delivery.” It is first important to note the use of the word protect. They are acknowledging that the Internet adopting such a role is a possible outcome. However, it is equally as important to note the fact that the union struck over this possible outcome. The strike demonstrates that they believe that such an outcome is not only likely, but already somewhat of a reality today. In support of my point is what the presidents state later in their statement, “...we have a contract that includes WGA jurisdiction and separated rights in new media, residuals for Internet reuse....” These gains in the eyes of the union point to the effects the Internet and digital

technology have had, not only on already existing media, but, the profession of writing in general. The WGA is certainly not the only group in the world that recognizes this shifting trend either.

Opinions and predictions on the effect of digital technology on the writing process and the role of the writer are not difficult to come by. In a chapter on ideologies, technologies, and teaching in her book “Research and Scholarship: The Changing Discipline” Nancy Kaplan explains, “. . .no tool can be innocent, free of ideological constructions” (27). The WGA strike that began in late 2007 and lasted about two months was centered on the way the Internet and “new media” affected already existing media. When the presidents wrote “residuals for Internet reuse,” they were referring to the fact that, among other uses, the networks post episodes of shows on their sites and sell advertising spots during those Internet “broadcasts.” Thus, the strike focused on the ideology of Internet advertising revenue. Who had rights to it? How was advertising sold? How do banner advertisements on the page that links to the online episodes factor in? I do not know the intricate answers to these questions that may or may not have been reached in the deal mentioned by the presidents. What I do know is the important changes being demonstrated in the discussion of this ideological construction.

Similarly to Kapan, in his article “Writing in the Information Age,” Nigel Ross states, “. . .present-day information technology has made for easy and rapid access to enormous amounts of information , with hotly debated consequences regarding copyright, censorship, and the communication of information” (39). Other topics in WGA strike talks were the ownership of the intellectual creations of the writers. Essentially, the

dispute was over the precedent being set that the networks could post on the Internet and profit from the creation of the writers, while the writers received no piece of that profit at all. Thus, the argument is that the writers' ownership of their creations was subverted and subsumed through the power of the internet. Regardless of your stance on the issue, the debate was, and is, both literally and metaphorically on the table. The ideology of intellectual ownership in the coming century is being constructed. Ross closes his article, "...we are clearly only in the early stages of a series of technological developments that are likely to have profound effects on society..." (45). The presidents of the WGA echo this sentiment to their members, urging them to "support our brothers and sisters in SAG [Screen Actors Guild] who, as their contract expires in less than five months, will be facing many of the same challenges we have just endured." The ideological construction goes on, and, more importantly to our discussion, it is certainly not limited to the members of the media or professionals in general.

In his article "The global 'epidemic' of movie 'piracy': crime-wave or social construction?" Majid Yar discusses the implications of uploading and downloading movies to and from the Internet through the lens of social construction. In his conclusion Yar writes that "the rise of piracy" can be seen "as the outcome of a range of social, economic, political and technological changes that are radically reconfiguring the global political and cultural coordinates within which the consumption of media goods takes place" (691). The latter part of Yar's statement portrays his point more in the light of our broader discussion. More specifically, the phrase that shapes this direction is "the consumption of media goods." Rather than seeing the concept of Internet piracy as a

reaction to the “coordinates” he hints at, Yar places it within, or at least parallel to, media consumption. Neither concept exists independently of the other. He continues: “From this point of view, globalization, socio-economic ‘development’ and innovation in information technology help to establish the conditions for expanded production and consumption of ‘pirate’ audio-visual goods” (691). While he focuses solely on pirated goods, I would like to keep our focus a little broader, on simply ‘audio-visual goods’, or reified creations of pop culture. Likewise, though I do not dismiss the relevance or importance of a discussion of globalization and socio-economic developments to this topic, I do not wish to focus on it here. Perhaps future discussions could focus on that topic. Rather, I’d like to focus on Yar’s latter concern, innovation in information technology.

In this chapter I aim to establish two things: a theoretical discussion of composition and communication technologies and a practical discussion of the applications of such technologies. The first part of this chapter will focus on the former topic, delving into theoretical discussions on the subject of “techno-literacy.” The second part of this chapter will focus on the latter topic, providing a specific example of such technology in order to gain a more practical grasp on the theoretical definition. I will then conclude with an explication of a metaphor of techno-literacy through the television game show Deal or No Deal that will serve as a summary of this chapter and a transition into the next chapter. Through this discussion, I will establish how techno-literacy provides a louder voice to the individual than ever before, increasing his influence over reified objects and the ideology they support.

Does techno-literacy mean robots can read?

When reading and discussing theory on technology and the Internet, even under the constraints that I have described above, it is extremely difficult to find a place to begin. Thus, it is my intent to guide our present discussion in a manner which I believe makes sense. I will begin on the design end of the topic and transition into the consumption.

Using Theater as a metaphor, Brenda Laurel pulls apart the design of a computer interface in her book *Computer as Theater*. Her dissection is extremely valuable for a few reasons. First, her intent in using a theater metaphor is to emphasize the human input into the interface. This emphasis mirrors mine in the thought box metaphor of the reification process. I also wanted to emphasize the human input, though not on the computer design process (although it would be wise to ask here: “What’s the difference between the computer design process and the reification process?). Second, viewing the theory of the design end of the technology first allows us to conceive of the techno-literacy process from both ends, that of the creator of the material to be read, and that of the reader.

Laurel is certainly aware of these dual roles as she highlights a person participating in “representation.” She describes: “We arrive at notions like ‘cut’ and ‘paste’ and even ‘write’ that seem to suggest that people working with computers are operating in the arena of the concrete. We often fail to see that these are representations of tools and activities and to notice how that makes them different from (and often better

than) the real thing” (31). Already, though we are solely discussing the design end of the technology, we can see how these ideas can be applied both ways. It is Laurel’s contention that in order to better design these interfaces, we must see the representations and consider them from the perspective that the user will. However, doing so also requires that the user views the tools as the representation they are. Thus, when he “cuts” electronic text, he must realize that he and the computer are representing a shared “understanding” of scissors on the interface. In a way, the computer becomes the “thought box” which I described in the previous chapter, although the human input is much more directed than the open ended process of reification (once again, it would be wise to ask here: “is it much more directed?”). These parenthetical questions I am raising are not to be answered here, but I am raising them for an important reason. They must be asked when utilizing these technologies under the lens I am putting forward.

At the end of her first chapter, Laurel continues the thought we have begun here. “Designing human-computer experience isn’t about building a better desktop. It’s about creating imaginary worlds that have a special relationship to reality—worlds in which we can extend, amplify, and enrich our own capacities to think, feel, and act” (33). The important phrases to notice here are “building a better desktop” and “creating imaginary worlds.” Laurel clashes these ideas against each other, contrasting the physical construction of a machine against the imagining of “worlds.” I cannot help but think of Disney’s “Imagineering” that I was told about as a child. The point is to emphasize what the human mind can conceive of rather than to allow it to be constricted by illegitimate limitations. Of course, there will always be constraints that will need to be worked

around (is that not the technology we are discussing here?), but what is important to remember is the perspective to take on those constraints. Laurel does not want them to become self limiting. In other words, rather than looking at it as if the computer makes the world, we look at it as if the user makes the world. Thus, design focuses on the user rather than the technology.

I conceive of this idea by adopting metaphors that are often used when discussing political organizations, top down and grass roots. I will explain these terms thusly. I was having a discussion regarding the holiday of Valentine's Day. A young man was arguing that as long as you could choose to celebrate it or not, if you did celebrate it, you were celebrating it for your own reasons. I disagreed by stating that Valentine's Day was a "top down" holiday. An organization or groups with more power than you defines something for you and, even if you choose to agree with their terms, you are accepting their terms, not vice versa. Thus, the terms are handed from the top down. The corollary to this idea would be an anniversary between you and a partner. When you and your partner (you and any number of people really) decide to celebrate an anniversary you are setting the terms of what and when the celebration will be. Thus, the idea is growing from the idea upwards, like grass and its roots. This binary certainly mirrors Laurel's, where rather than conceiving of the interface from the designers end (the top down approach), we design from the users end (the grass roots approach).

Jay David Bolter echoes this approach to Internet technology in his book *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and The History of Writing*. He uses a metaphor of a museum to explain how technology has affected the dissemination of information:

In other words, the new museum is a cultural (and physical expression) of the organizational character of electronic text. It is organized as a network, rather than a hierarchy. And it is fair to suggest that the network is becoming the favored structure in American culture today—not only in the way we construct our books, libraries, and museums but also in the way we arrange our social and political lives. (231)

Rather than “top down” and “grass roots,” he uses the terms “hierarchy” and “network.” Network is perhaps a better metaphor when discussing these technologies because it emphasizes lateral movement more than “grass roots,” which simply flips “top down” to “down up.” More importantly, Bolter brings forward the idea that this networking technology creates a similar phenomenon in our culture in general. In other words, it is socially constructing (or reconstructing perhaps) our culture into a network rather than a hierarchy. This re-definition of our culture is perhaps the reason the young man in the Valentine’s Day discussion didn’t see the choice of celebrating the holiday as top down. Rather, he was seeing it as “networking.” The information was given to him (if he chose to receive it), and he could chose to do with it what he wanted. It was there for him to click on or not.

The young man was perhaps participating in the following situation that Bolter describes: “Individuals today wander through an aesthetic supermarket picking out what interests them...We are hard put to criticize any of these choices: they are simply questions of taste” (235). The young man was essentially saying that when wandering through the supermarket, we all walk down the aisle marked “holidays” and choose what

to celebrate from within all the items on that shelf, from Valentine's Day to Canadian Flag Day. And, just like Bolter, he would surely say that those decisions are merely a question of taste. I would go even further to say that those decisions are part of the ideological social construction of our culture. Bolter continues: "In the United States, the most thoroughly networked society, the distinction between high culture and popular culture has all but vanished" (235). Whereas the hierarchy, or top down approach, privileged certain ideas, products, or holidays, networks privilege none of those things. In the electronic network, they all appear the same way. That is, they all appear the same way until the individual adds his input. It is the decision of the individual to consume a thing or idea. He then adds his unique presentation to that object, or his consumption adds to the number of consumers of that object, emphasizing it by popularity. We have surely made the transition from design end to consumer end.

Bolter contends that techno-literacy will be the most important talent in such a network based culture: "Some sociologists and economists fear that our society may be splitting into a technologically sophisticated upper class and a lower class lacking the skills required by the so-called information economy. Although those fears may be exaggerated, they are not without substance. And if there is such a bifurcation, then computer literacy will be the distinguishing talent" (224). Regardless of economic and political concerns (though they are important, they are not our focus here), it is clear that techno-literacy is an important consideration. Bolter calls it the "distinguishing talent." The question then becomes: "What is techno-literacy and is it already being used today?"

The answer to the latter part of that question is much simpler. Yes, it is being used today. As I am composing this chapter, I am listening to MP3s on my iPod while allowing my Microsoft Outlook to continually check my Internet email accounts over our university's wireless internet connection. Bolter (and many others) would surely say I am a member of the "technologically sophisticated upper class." I was raised in an environment that allowed me to become so techno-literate. But what is techno-literate? It first makes sense to address the two parts of the term separately.

"Techno" is the first part of the word technology: "the branch of knowledge that deals with the creation and use of technical means and their interrelation with life, society, and the environment, drawing upon such subjects as industrial arts, engineering, applied science, and pure science" (dictionary.com). Since we know we are not dealing with the creation of technical means (as we are dealing with the user end, not the design end), we can say that "techno" is everything from the phrase "use of" on in the definition. "Literacy" is a form of the word literate. Someone is literate when they are, "able to read and write; having or showing knowledge of literature, writing, etc; characterized by skill, lucidity, polish, or the like; having knowledge or skill in a specified field; having an education; educated" (dictionary.com). While it would be difficult to pull one definition from this list, we can pull together a few common strings. Essentially, to be literate is to be able to do something, and determining how literate you are has to do with determining how skilled you are at doing that thing. Therefore, if we combine our two terms to be "techno-literate" means "to be able to use technical means..." However, that definition is at once wordy and vague. It does not give us a satisfactory understanding of the words

for our purposes. Therefore, I do not wish to take it off of the supermarket's shelf, so let us turn to some other writers to gain a better understanding of the term.

Other thinkers focus on the earlier elements of the definition of literate, the ability to read and write in the medium of choice. In her article "Accumulating Literacy: Writing And Learning To Write In The Twentieth Century," Deborah Brandt makes the following statement about the history (and future) of literacy: "Literacy is always in flux. Learning to read and write necessitates an engagement with this flux, with the layers of literacy's past, present, and future, often embodied in materials and tools and just as often embodied in the social relationships we have with the people who are teaching us to read and write" (666). In this case, the tools that are related to Brandt's quote would be general technology (as that is the first half of the term "techno-literacy"), and specifically the computer. But when I write the word "computer," what do I mean? So far in this chapter, I have mainly addressed the interface and how it affects the user. We have seen the transition from a hierarchical culture to a network culture, although it would surely be foolish to say that any culture is one extreme or the other. Rather, the culture is weighted to the network side. Still, even this point is in seemingly general terms. Let us see if we can find a more specific direction for our understanding of what it means to be techno-literate.

Nicholas Burbules discusses the role of hypertext (text that links the user to other text when clicked on) on reading and writing in his article "Rhetorics of the Web: hyperreading and critical literacy." He looks at the question from the perspective of what difference there is between hypertext and "normal text": "...hypertext seems to *add*

dimensions of writing, and to that extent may encourage new practices of reading as well: ones that might prove more hospitable to alternative, non-traditional points of view and more inclusive of general terms” (107). Once again, we have returned to the notion of a network rather than a hierarchy. The addition of dimensions to hypertext writing enables more choices when the user browses through Bolter’s supermarket. However, this description of hypertext writing is still in general terms. What exactly are the dimensions that are added to hypertext that change the writing and reading process?

Burbles describes the effect of the concept of links (which are the integral part of hypertext) on reading and writing: “...links define a fixed set of relations given to the reader, among which the reader may choose, but beyond which most readers will never go. Moreover, links do not only express semiotic relations, but also, significantly, establish pathways of possible movement within the Web space; they suggest relations, but also *control access to information...*” (105). This excerpt shapes our understanding in a number of key ways.

First, rather than merely analyzing the general idea of the “computer,” Burbles focuses on “Web space.” This emphasis is a contemporary concern. While hypertext certainly exists in word processing (linking documents together or linking documents to web pages), thinkers are more focused on the Web because there is much greater reliance on the technique there, and much more information available to the user there.

Second, Burbles addresses this issue from the perspective of the reader. What the reader has in front of him is “given” to him and he must “choose” which “pathway” he takes. This perspective limits the reader and extends Bolter’s supermarket metaphor.

The reader travels through the aisles and can only choose from the items that are already on the shelves. Those items are the only ones he has to choose from. Likewise, there are only a certain number of ways to traverse the aisles of the supermarket to get from item to item. So, even though the network metaphor still applies, we see why it is not important to think of the network-hierarchy dichotomy in extremes. There is still a bit of a “top down” culture, as the writer stocks the shelves and designs the layout of the store.

Burple’s perspective also implies that the writer necessarily creates a finite number of “possible” paths for the reader to take. While that statement is certainly true in one writer’s document, web pages do not exist in a vacuum, where once a user travels to one page it is impossible for him to ever reach another. Often web page designers will link to other pages that they did not create. While it is true that the reader is still being given a finite number of possible pathways, they are not as limited as Burbles may lead us to believe. One page designed by one writer can link to another page designed by another writer. This diversity of designers creates an unpredictability of the path of the reader. Though it is easy to look at one page and say where the reader could go from there, the more pages a reader links to, the number of possible paths he could take increases exponentially. Those paths are, of course, limited to the number of pages on the Internet, but that limit can in no way be attributed to the writer, and is surely in line with the limits of humanity itself. Therefore, the designer-user balance once again shifts towards network based culture. While the designer controls the choices the shopper faces while in his supermarket, once he creates paths to other supermarkets, the power of choice opens up to the shopper and the power of design is shared between the owners of

the various stores. Thus far, however, I have seemingly favored the reader in our discussion of techno-literacy, so I wish to give the role of the writer a more in-depth treatment.

Patricia Sullivan states that, "...the writer is entering an era where the published page is more directly under her or his control" in her article "Taking Control of the Page: Electronic Writing and Word Publishing" (44). In order to explicate the type of control the writer now has, she first points out that, "most computer-writing discussions have sought to fit electronic writing into currently accepted writing theories" (45). This point is important to note because so far I have slightly treated writing differently in relation to techno-literacy than it is relation to more traditional media without acknowledging so. I have said that the writer "designs" his page. I also noted in the supermarket metaphor that beyond which items will appear on the shelves, he also controls the layout of the aisles in the store. This design perspective is indicative of Sullivan's claim that the writer has greater control in electronic writing. No longer does the writer have control over just the words on the page.

Sullivan describes this "design" element of the writer's role by pointing out that the separate process of the "production" of words and the "publication" of words will "merge and become simplified in the world-publishing milieu" (46). She points out the new technologies that allow for greater ease of desktop publishing, such as personal printers and the availability of printing software. This combination of roles insures that writers "must come to terms with the page, as well as the text...must become sensitive about how pages look, attuned to how readers will see the pages, and be able to negotiate

a look for pages that supports the aims of the texts” (56). No longer is the writer in crafting solely the language on the page. He is in control of the page itself, the language *of* the page. This role includes a need to consider such qualities as spacing, font, and the integration of images. To continue to extend the supermarket metaphor, the designer is not only in charge of the items on the shelves and the layout of the aisles. He is in charge of determining all the traits of the store, including the shelves themselves (what type they are, how many there will be, etc) and the theme of the store (the name, the logo, etc). Essentially, the only decision that is made for the writer is that he will design a page, although even the definition of the page is arguably up for grabs.

We have come to a more precise definition of “techno-literacy,” although it is notably difficult to confine such a definition because it is theoretically open ended. Essentially though, “techno-literacy” means the ability to use technology to take advantage of the choices a user has in front of him, which means both being aware that such a number of choices exist, and knowing what to do with those choices. When reading, as opposed to writing, the choices of the users become much more directed. He takes on the role of a traveler, navigating the network of pathways which are available to him. In contrast, while writing, the choices of the user are much less directed. He takes on the role of the designer, constructing the pathways, perhaps even reconstructing what a pathway is. In my next section, I will examine an example of newer technology and how using that technology opens up choices to the user, stressing the importance of becoming techno-literate, and causing us to tweak our understanding of techno-literacy.

I'll Wiki your Pedia

An often cited example of the Internet “gone wild” is Wikipedia. As a “newer” example of Internet technology (it was founded in 2001), people in all professions are still unsure of how to deal with it. Most relevant to the overall scope of this thesis, people are still unsure of its reliability as a credible source of information. Karl Helicher describes the dispute in the article “I Want My Wikipedia!”: “Wikipedia has been the source of some controversy because it allows users to edit existing content. Even with the caveat that ‘content must be verifiable and must not violate copyright,’ some unethical edits have called into question’s the site’s authority” (124). The site’s authority is undetermined because it draws heavily upon network culture. It blurs the role of the user. It blurs the line between reader and writer.

The official Wikipedia About page defines itself as: “The name Wikipedia is a portmanteau of the words *wiki* (a type of collaborative website) and *encyclopedia*. Wikipedia's articles provide links to guide the user to related pages with additional information.” What is important to understand about this description is that the articles that “guide” the user (who is adopting the role of the reader in this description) are created by the user himself. In other words, the page is both written and read by the user. One page may not be written and read by the same user (though it could be), but a user can easily shift between reader and writer on multiple pages. This fluid nature of role shifting for the user is due to Wikipedia’s standards for editing.

Also on its About page, Wikipedia states the following requirements for a user to edit an entry:

Visitors do not need specialised qualifications to contribute, since their primary role is to write articles that cover existing knowledge; this means that people of all ages and cultural and social backgrounds can write Wikipedia articles. With rare exceptions, articles can be edited by anyone with access to the Internet, simply by clicking the *edit this page* link.

Anyone is welcome to add information, cross-references or citations.

Simply by clicking on the *edit this page* link of an entry, anyone with the know-how can change the page. In other words, anyone who is techno-literate (and has access to the site) can both contribute to and take from Wikipedia, and, presumably, anyone who is at the stage of clicking on such a link is already both techno-literate enough and has the access to the site. But this ease of role switching is what worries some critics.

In her article “Know It All” Stacy Schiff critiques the editing policies of Wikipedia. She explains:

Nothing about high-minded collaboration guarantees accuracy, and open editing invites abuse. Senators and congressmen have been caught tampering with their entries; the entire House of Representatives has been banned from Wikipedia several times. If anyone can edit the site, it certainly seems like a system that is ripe for abuse. Helicher disagrees with Schiffer’s critique though. He reviewed the site from the same “current affairs” perspective and “was pleased by Wikipedia’s presentation of controversial subjects. The talk pages may be frequently

biased, but they do offer spirited commentary... (“I Want My Wikipedia!”
124)

The talk pages that she is referring to are another feature of the site. Before a user edits a page, he can click on the *discussion* link and voice his perspective to other users. He can also use the *discussion* page to question already existing material on the entry page. This feature allows for a community to grow within the site or for already existing communities to express themselves in new ways.

Also in “I Want My Wikipedia!”, Barry X. Miller takes a pop culture perspective on the site and addresses the role of communities in the site. He writes, “Wiki is a seemingly endless pop-culture cornucopia...,” and gives the example of professional wrestling which “...currently features 20 subcategories that collectively provide an extensive amount of detailed and accurate information a hardcore fan will be hard-body-pressed to find in traditional print sources” (122). Beyond the hardcore fan, the casual pro wrestling fan can use the site as a quick resource to discover information he could never find by consulting his local library. Wikipedia has created new shelves in the supermarket for the user to take items off of and provided a location for a community to compound its knowledge that was previously combined nowhere.

More generally than Wikipedia, the Internet has allowed fans of the entertainment medium that is professional wrestling to create what they call the “Internet Wrestling Community” (or IWC for short), a trail of sites and message boards where fans interact to read and discuss their interest. On a column called *Microcosmos* on one such site titled *thewrestlingvoice.com*, a user under the pseudonym The Butcher writes, “Within the

Internet Wrestling Community there are the controllers, the followers, the commoners and the subsequent social ranking, essentially identical to the structure of any business or population.” Due to the techno-literacy of its constituents, the IWC has created a community that Wikipedia is part of, and that any user that takes on the role of reader of those articles on the site becomes a part of. The growth of the IWC in particular and such communities in general speaks to a key component of techno-literacy, accessibility, but should also not be confused with quality of use.

The wiki concept does not end with a sole incarnation called Wikipedia. Rhea R. Borja describes the use of wikis in the classroom in her article “Educators Experiment With Student-Written ‘Wikis’”; but before she delves into specific classroom examples, she explicates the general appeal of the technology: “No longer do you have to be an uber-geek with a mastery of HTML or other computer language to compose on the Web. Now all it takes is a few clicks of the computer mouse” (10). As the technologies that serve as gateways to the Internet are simplified, the path to techno-literacy apparently becomes easier. I use the word apparently because I wish to separate knowing how to use something from knowing how to use something well. Clearly this perspective on literacy has already been subsumed in our culture as when children are first taught to read books, they are classified by which level they can “read on.” So, even though on “the internet, everybody is a millenarian,” that level of accessibility and that new shared perspective does not necessitate a high quality of usage. It is the quality of usage that separates users and the information from the rest of the network. Thus, it is important for us to remember that though in theory the network culture seems equally accessible to

everyone who is techno-literate, in practice it is similar to any other skill. Those users who are more techno-literate will be better able to navigate the supermarket or design their own supermarket.

The Banker's Offer

Deal or No Deal is a television game show that simultaneously features control and lack of control on the part of the contestant. Throughout the show, the contestant is asked to make a series of choices that makes it appear as if he is in control. However, there is actually a large factor of control in the hands of others, most notably the shadowy presence known only as The Banker. In the techno-literate network culture that I have explicated in this chapter, the player is the reader and the banker is the writer (though a few other people contribute to the design of the show).

The game begins with a series of numbered unopened briefcases, each containing a pre-designated monetary value represented on a board. The player chooses a case to be his. From then on, he has to choose a certain number of cases to open each round. At the conclusion of each round, the banker offers the player a monetary amount based upon the remaining values on the board. The player must once again make a decision. Does he take the deal offered by the banker or continue to open cases? His role as the reader in the situation is evident when the “writers” of the situation are described first.

The most important “writers” to mention are those people who designed the game itself, creating the cases to choose from and the format of selection. They have metaphorically designed the page. After those “writers” are the people who put the

monetary amounts into the cases. They are metaphorically linking the cases to certain destinations in a manner similar to hypertext which, as we learned, guides the reader in different directions. Finally, The Banker “writes” the transition between rounds with his offers, another clear example of hypertext. It is amongst all these links that the decisions of the player take place. From this perspective, it is evident how the player is the reader. In each situation, he must read the information that is presented to him and decide in which direction he is to proceed. Unlike techno-literacy, the role of reader and writer is more rigidly defined. The player does not have the ability to shift roles so fluidly in the middle of the game. Amongst all this description, there is one more important person to note.

The host of the game, Howie Mandel, is representative of the technology that eases access to the network culture for the user. At appropriate moments throughout the game, he explains the situation to the user, succinctly telling him what choices he has, how he arrived at those choices, and where those choices will lead him. Essentially, he simplifies the access to the game so that any player who knows the basic rules can make the choices he needs to.

This metaphor of *Deal or No Deal* for network culture and techno-literacy emphasizes two important aspects of the concepts we analyzed in this chapter. First, theoretically, it points to the constant choices that must be made on the part of the user. Since the culture is no longer hierarchical where decisions are made from the top and handed down, the user must always decide which direction he wants to move in. Second, practically, the network culture does not completely destroy the hierarchal culture.

Though the user can easily shift from reader to writer and back again, when a user is a writer he is essentially giving information and when a user is a reader he is essentially receiving information. In other words, the reader does have the ability to answer: Deal or No Deal? But The Banker must offer a deal first.

In my next chapter, I will discuss the navigation of one such techno-literate community (such as the IWC which I mentioned in this chapter) and the way the members of that community use their techno-literacy to interact with and shape the reified objects that they exalt. I will utilize my personal experiences in that community as both a reader and a writer to bring a deeper understanding to the concepts discussed in this chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM DICKENS TO DESMOND: SHAPING THE IDEOLOGY OF *LOST*

“To think the Trekkie revolution might have been grounded if it weren’t for fans who lobbied NBC with a letter-writing campaign to bring the crew of the Enterprise back for a third and final season, and from there into movies and spinoffs.”

Rati Bishnoi, *Other Fan Driven Rescues*, USA Today

In the late 80s and early 90s, Patrick Stewart as Captain Jean Luc Picard led the crew of the starship Enterprise on a never-ending mission to boldly go where no one had gone before in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. But Picard’s journey would not have been possible if not for the previous iconic captain of the Enterprise, James T. Kirk. What makes Kirk so impressive is not what he did within the show, but what he did outside of the show. More specifically, the fans of the original *Star Trek* responded so passionately to the show that it is television history, a reified object in the development of our national culture.

The one event that stands out about the series is not a fictional one. The fans saved the show through a massive organized campaign, in the days before the internet. In an article for *Smithsonian* Chai Woodham described the event: “*Star Trek* premieres September 8, 1966. Poor ratings get the spacey TV series cancelled after three seasons, but fervent fans—known as Trekkies—and their dollars propel it to cult status through syndication, four spinoffs and ten movies” (30). The fervent fans about whom Woodham is referring began with the letter writers who saved Kirk and his crew and grew exponentially from that point. The fact that enough people loved the show to write so

many letters to NBC that the executives revived it is amazing. Every day people affected what was broadcast to them through massive organization, all without cellular phones, internet message boards, and instant messaging.

Flash forward forty something years from the original series, and the legacy of these savior fans endures. With communication technology seemingly in its infancy (in relation to the kinds we have today) those people were able to organize and launch a successful campaign. They surely had no idea the precedent they were setting, but they are now the precursor of an entire generation of passionate entertainment consumers. Television shows being saved in some incarnation or another is almost becoming a common occurrence. Most recently, viewers of the CBS show *Jericho* saved it from a first season cancellation. “CBS resurrected the canceled first-season series...after an intense campaign by impassioned fans” (Keveny). Thousands of fans sent peanuts (some sort of reference to a story on the show) to the network until the executives were forced to acknowledge the fans’ cries. In the spring of 2008, new episodes of *Jericho* began to air. A famous example from a few years prior is the movie *Serenity*. Joss Whedon, the creator of highly successful television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, produced a season’s worth of episodes of a space western for FOX titled *Firefly*. The show was canceled before all the episodes aired, but it was released on DVD, and the sales were so strong, and the fan buzz so loud, that another studio negotiated with Whedon to bring *Serenity*, a movie based on the series, to the theaters. Likewise, another once canceled FOX series, the politically incorrect cartoon *Family Guy*, was brought back, this time by its original network, due to strong DVD sales and high rerun ratings on

Cartoon Network. The level of accountability for network executives has clearly increased since the original Trekkies proved that in space people *can* hear you scream.

The first example I turn to is one of my favorite shows of the past few years *The 4400*. The show was a science-fiction that aired on the USA Network drama written by a couple of the producers of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. It is a directly traceable result of the Trekkie Revolution. Episodes were broadcast in the summer, the “off-season” for television, and it ran for a total of four seasons before being quietly canceled without a notice by network executives. Here is the point where my personal experience enters the story, and we return to the idea of techno-literacy from my previous chapter.

As is common today, the USA Networks provided fans with an online message board to discuss the show. Upon the conclusion of season four, speculation of cancellation (due to the lack of a renewal announcement) began to run rampant amongst the fans on this board. The chatter even spread to popular entertainment new sites such as AintItCoolNews. As it was the best place for updates on the show’s status, I sporadically checked the official message board. A few pre-emptive campaigns to save the show popped up in the form of online petitions. I ignored them, dismissing the fan base as small and the campaigns as surely ineffective.

Soon, the predicted bad news came. A producer of the show personally posted on the message board that the run of the *4400* was over. The salvation campaigns found a renewed vigor. Since I discovered the message I had been anticipating, I filed the show under dead in my brain and continued to dismiss the campaigns as futile attempts by a miniscule fan base. The show aired in a shortened summer season on a smaller cable

network. Surely there could not be that many passionate viewers. Weeks later, I logged into FoxNews and was shocked.

Browsing the Entertainment section of the major news provider's website, I read the headline "'4400' Fans Send 6,000 Bags of Sunflower Seeds to USA Network in Attempt to Save Show." I clicked on the story in disbelief. It stated that a sunflower seed company sent "650 pounds of seeds, with orders from about 30 states and a dozen countries" and that the campaign was "modeled after one by fans who sent peanuts to keep the CBS show "Jericho" alive." Techno-literacy and network culture had enabled these fans to organize across state and national borders to not only bellow a cry loud enough for network executives to hear in their once top down "ivory towers," but to learn about and emulate a previous campaign (which was surely an emulation of a previous campaign itself) that had already achieved the goal they desired. Though the fans of the *4400* have not yet seen their show renewed, their actions represent the most recent iteration of an important development in our techno-literate network culture; and it makes me wonder what inspires these fans to be so passionate.

Let us now return to a television show mentioned briefly above, Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Like the other shows mentioned thus far, *Buffy* has a large fan base. In 2007, TV Guide named it the #3 cult show of all time in its article "TV Guide Names the Top Cult Shows Ever" (other shows mentioned thus far in this chapter appearing on the list: #25 *Firefly*, #15 *Family Guy*, #11 *Jericho*, #1 *Star Trek*). It surely fits the criteria of a pervasive reified culture item. In his article "The Clothes Make the Fan: Fashion and Online Fandom when Buffy the Vampire Slayer Goes to Ebay," Josh Stenger describes

the manifestation of the passion of *Buffy* fans through internet technology and the source of that passion, highlighting the heightened level of interaction between consumers and products, communicators and reified object.

He begins by establishing two concepts. First, he defines fandom as a “...‘participatory culture,’ one in which people are bound together by a wide range of desires expressed through an equally wide range of practices” (26). What is interesting about this definition is the way that “fandom” has seemingly evolved since the letter writing movement for *Star Trek* in the late 60s. While watching could be considered “participation,” television has always been a medium that has been characterized as top down. A network and its employees create and broadcast a show and the viewers take it in. This seeming contradiction is also highlighted by Stenger’s phrase “wide range of practices.” Traditionally, there is only one “practice” when it comes to being a viewer...viewing. Stenger continues, “...fans frequently relate to programs, characters, and actors in ways that expand on and move well beyond official narratives, imagery, and relationships” (26). The key phrases in this quote are “move beyond” and “official.” “Official” items of the show are those creations of the crew of the show and are considered “canon.” It is thus important to consider how fans “move beyond” these creations to compose their own “non-canon” creations that expand on the “canon” material of the show.

In the second concept he establishes, Stenger directs his discussion towards our discussion of the techno-literate network culture. He states: “It would be difficult to overstate either the scope or importance of *Buffy*’s Web-based fan activity” (28). Fans of

Buffy use (I use the present tense because, though the show is over, the fan community endures) internet technologies to “move beyond” the information and objects transmitted through their television screens to create their own objects. They interact with the show in a way that is much more intense and far reaching than fans of the *4400*, which is clearly evidenced through *TVGuide*’s placement of it at #3 on their list of top cult shows of all time. The consideration then turns to this bond between the fans and the show. Where does it come from? Why is it so intense? Why, after the cancellation of the show, does it perpetuate? The answer seems to be in the technology.

Stenger’s specific discussion of *Buffy* fandom focuses on the manifestation of it in an eBay auction following the show’s ending. Twentieth Century Fox, the production company for the show, auctioned props and costumes from the show on the popular site. The event was a success, with outfits selling for thousands of dollars (one that Stenger mentions specifically sold for \$13,000.08). More important than the monetary exchange that occurred, was the cultural exchange. As fans purchased these props and pieces of clothing from the show, they were participating in the reification process described in my first chapter. They were bestowing importance upon the items themselves and the source of those items (the show). The relationship is reciprocal and is expedited and increased by the incarnation of internet technology known as eBay.

This relationship changes the role of the viewer into one that he arguably has never had before. Stenger explicates the transformation, “...each prop served as a metonymy for the entire franchise, allowing the buyer to cross the line from viewer to part owner” (32). As the viewers create “non-canon” compositions, they are

“appropriating content,” “canon” content, of the show as their own and literally making it their own (27). They are at once both taking from and contributing to the “thought box,” emphasizing the importance of the double-side arrows in my diagrams. More important is the viewers’ acknowledgement of this new role they have taken on. If they were to simply purchase items in the auction, it could very well be said that they were still simply consumers in the top down culture. However, when they begin to “appropriate” material for their own creation, they are clearly in Bolter’s supermarket, choosing which material they want to use, which they enjoy, highlighting what they want in this network culture. We must now consider if these fans have actually crossed the line from “viewer to part owner” as Stenger contends, or if that transition is merely an illusion perpetrated by the actual owners of the show, the network and its employees, by exploiting the trappings of the network culture.

The example of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, though culturally significant, is no longer on the “cutting edge.” Thus, I turn to a show that is much more involved in this network culture than *Buffy* ever will be. Listed at #5 on the TVGuide’s list of top cult shows of all time (though it had just finished airing only its third of six projected seasons at the time of the publication of the list), ABC’s *LOST* is a television show that not only pushes the boundaries of conventional storytelling, but engrosses itself in this network culture in a manner which has never been seen before, fostering a unique bond with its fans. In the article for its list, TVGuide even acknowledged that they had to ask themselves, “...such tough questions as: Is *LOST* too ‘big’ to be considered cult?” The

answer to that question is maybe, and that possibility is one of the major reasons the culture surrounding the show merits discussion.

I have been a contributing member of the *LOST* community from day one and continue to be this day. When the show originally began to air, I dove into the online discussions, searching the burgeoning message boards in order to connect with other viewers who were enthralled with the show. By the end of the second season, I had my own weekly column (published following that week's episode) and was soon published in *FHM* as one of the top four fan theories of the hiatus between seasons two and three. I still continue to participate in the community today, publishing my columns online (in both my blog and a website www.tvlost.com) and posting on a message board called *Fishbiscuitland* (lovingly nicknamed The Fishelage by members of the *LOST* community). This experience grants me a unique perspective from which to write on this subject.

Over the remainder of this chapter I will chronicle the *LOST* community with an emphasis on its relationship to the show as it is still in production. I will examine the role of the two main producers of the show, Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse, and co-creator J.J. Abrams in this relationship, as well as detail the story behind the creation of *Fishbiscuitland* as a "spin off" of the "official" message board *The Fuselage*. It is my intent to demonstrate how these people, places, and events contribute to the creation of the ideology of the reified cultural object *LOST* and place a new importance on the perspective of the individual based upon his level of techno-literacy.

Creators or Caretakers?

The perspective of executive producers Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse is essential to the unique role *LOST* has taken on in our culture. They understand that nature of their positions as executive producers and the nature of television shows are increasingly inter-textual. In a special feature on the Season Three DVD, Lindelof compares their show to classic literature: "There's a very Dickensian quality to *LOST* in general in terms of the way....that Dickens wrote his stories, which was in a heavy serialized fashion...you'd read it a chapter at a time, and he would get audience and fan feedback. It was a very primitive, sort of, you know, internet." The specific feature, The *LOST* Book Club, focuses entirely on the show's relationship with literature. Before even turning to Lindelof's reference to the internet, it is important to note this emphasis on literature in the show and the comparison to Dickens.

While it may sound trite to observe, many of the characters on *LOST* are readers. Yes, the show takes place on an island a plane crashed on, but many new locations the main characters discover contain book cases. One episode even began with a book club meeting. A character named Sawyer is spotted reading the most. In a scene in the third season episode "Every Man For Himself" he even goes tit-for-tat with another character in *Of Mice and Men* quotes. What is the relevance of pointing out this imagery of literature in the show? As the producers point out in the Book Club special features, they are heavy readers themselves and not only want to acknowledge their influences, but expose their favorite books to viewers in hopes that someone will seek to read them.

Lindelof references the old reading public service announcements, stating how they inspired him to read, and states that he hopes that his references can do the same for other people. And it works. Seeing Sawyer read *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand inspired me to finally open up *Atlas Shrugged* when I realized the connection between the *LOST* character and Rand's writing. More importantly, creating the desire to read in any viewer is the fact that Lindelof and Cuse have positioned their story as part of a conversation rather than making it an independent statement. Viewers will routinely read the books used in the show and emerge with some insight on the events and themes they did not previously have before. In fact, famed novelist Stephen King, one of the literary influences the producers and writers cite in The Book Club feature, is a fan of the show, and in his *EntertainmentWeekly.com* column *The Pop of King* he often participates in expressing his desires for the outcome of the show. In one installment titled "*LOST*'s Soul" he even directly addresses the producers with a plea: "But please, guys — don't beat this sweet cow to death with years of ponderous flashback padding. End it any way you want, but when it's time for closure, provide it. Don't just keep on wagon-training." The commentary is accompanied by over 600 comments from other members of the fan community, so King's voice may be the loudest, but the fact that a major influential figure in *LOST* continues to attempt to influence it suggests something: it is working.

This conversational nature of the show would not be possible if the producers did not do more than reference literature. Lots of shows and movies contain references to books and other forms of entertainment. Perhaps even more important is the producers' self-view. The first clue to their perspective is Lindelof's reference to Dickens. When he

compares his show to Dickens' work, he is noting that in: "The 1840s...the ones who enjoyed the largest success [from the serial form] were generally those of established reputation, and Dickens outdistanced them all in sales and celebrity" (Steinlight, 133). Flash forward 260 years and *LOST* fills that same niche as a heavily serialized show that enjoys large success, and everyone involved certainly enjoys immense celebrity. If we dig deeper into Lindelof's remark, we return to the concept of reification. In her article "'ANTI-BLEAK HOUSE': Advertising and the Victorian Novel," Emily Steinlight brings this Marxist observation to Dicken's work, "...the commodity itself speaks a language, I think it might be observed that it is just this language in which the novel finds itself caught...the objects that populate the Dickens novel also participate in the social relations of its human subjects" (148). Steinlight has blurred the lines between human input and object out, reinforcing the thought box conception of the reification process. She sees this participation in Dickens' work due to its serialized nature. As Lindelof has noted, these same traits translate over to *LOST*, and on an even more intricate level due to more advanced technology. *LOST* is a reified object of ideology that participates "in the social relations of its human subjects" and is heavily influenced by audience and fan feedback; and the producers are explicitly aware of this process beyond Lindelof's implicit acknowledgement of it.

In an interview regarding their writing process Cuse tells a personal story: "I remember the frustration I felt with *Twin Peaks* as a viewer. It went from being totally great to totally frustrating, because it just got more and more obtuse. We're really conscious of our show not doing that" ("Island Burns with Mystery"). *Twin Peaks* was a

fantasy mystery show that *LOST* is often compared to and only ran for two seasons. More important is the fact that Cuse, though he is the producer of the show, still envisions himself in the role of the viewer. Rather than allow himself to be bound by the dichotomous division between the two roles, he takes on both. This duality certainly opens him up for suggestions from the traditional “viewers.”

In another interview, Lindelof echoes this description of their writing process, using the metaphor of the Force from *Star Wars*. He explains that the show “...is bigger than us. It’s like, when one of us has an idea, we feel that’s what the show wanted us to do” (“*LOST*’s soul mates”). This perspective is interesting because while Lindelof acknowledges that they are the people who literally possess the idea, he also bestows some human qualities upon the show. In other words, he is fully aware, perhaps not in the same terminology that I am using here, of the human input and output of the reified object that is *LOST*. The show is bigger than them because it is the sum of more than their input and the input of other immediate authors such as the directors and actors. It is the sum of the input of an uncounted multitude of voices. Cuse extends this metaphor even further: “As we were working toward a solution, the show told us what needed to happen” (“*LOST*’s soul mates”). They did not control the show. It spoke to them. What is important to acknowledge here is the tenuous balance between acknowledging the independence of reified objects from each of us individually and accepting our responsibility as influences on those objects. The latter side of the balance, of course, is what I am seeking to stress. Thus, it must be said that while Lindelof and Cuse are attributing a certain a moment of power to the object (the power that others give to it),

they are tempering it with notions of them possessing the ideas and working for solutions. They are simultaneously aware of their input and other people's input into *LOST*'s thought box.

Lindelof and Cuse are also always sure to note how much of this input comes from their fans, and such statements are much more than public relations spiels. Lindelof has often enunciated the one question that they keep in the forefront of their minds to remind them of the fans perspective: "From the beginning, fans and even critics have been saying, 'Are you making it up as you go along?'" What reflects this question having a strong effect on Lindelof is that he describes it as "legitimate" (Levin). Rather than dismissing the critiques and cries because the show is *his*, he returns to the question, to be sure it is given proper attention.

Likewise, Cuse discusses how the audience has a bearing on the show, specifically the balance between the characters and the mystery, the new characters and the old: "There's a much larger audience for who Kate is going to choose than who are all the Hansos" ("*LOST* maps out series' distant end.") Thus, when the "Hansos," more commonly known as the "Others" (although I'm sure *LOST* fans could hold an interesting debate on whether the "Hansos" and the "Others" are actually the same people or not), were emphasized on the show at the beginning of Season Three, only two became regular mainstays on the cast. The opening seven episode arc for that season focused on Kate and her two choices, Jack and Sawyer, rather than the myriad of "Others" who were holding them captive. Some critics might call the choice a wasted opportunity for storytelling. I call it the input of the audience on the show.

Fans are not shy about claiming their input on the show either. Following new episodes, message board speculation is accompanied by comments about certain quotes and scenes, even plots points, coming from their community. And there is most certainly credence to their claims. In the break between Season Three and Four, the cast and the crew filmed short 1:00-3:00 minute “mobisodes” titled as a whole *LOST: The Missing Pieces*. The purpose of these ministories was largely to answer questions posed by viewers over the first three years. For instance, the “mobisode” titled “Tropical Depression” featured Dr. Arzt admitting he lied about a coming monsoon season. This lie of his occurred at the end of Season One. There has yet to be a monsoon on the show. These small stories represent yet another manner in which those people associated with *LOST* use new platforms to broadcast their show, and to interact with the fans. The “mobisodes” were originally released on Verizon mobile phones and subsequently posted on ABC.com six days later. The fans were heard and Dr. Arzt, long deceased on the show, was posthumously exposed as a liar.

Perhaps the most well known example of fan influence on the show are the characters of Nikki and Paulo. Originally, 48 people survived the plane crash. However, over the first two seasons, only around 14 main characters (referred to by the short lived Dr. Arzt as “The A-Team,” surely an in-joke from the writers to the fans) emerged. People openly wondered what happened to the other characters that did not suffer the same fate as Dr. Arzt. Thus, at the beginning of Season Three, the decision was made to introduce two new characters named Nikki and Paulo into the cast. No explanation was given for their sudden emergence. They were simply new main characters. Fans

complained, and in the episode “Expose” in the middle of Season Three that featured the two, they joined Dr. Arzt beneath the sand. Cuse explained the decision succinctly: “We buried them alive. OK, you guys don't like Nikki and Paulo, there” (Gough). The fans were not only heard, but were answered, loudly. What has with-out-a-doubt raised the volume of the fans’ voices is the techno-literacy of all the people involved with the show.

Over its run, the *LOST* team has shown a preference for the use of new media and technology in their mythology. The creation of “mobisodes” between Seasons Three and Four has already been noted. A video game for next generation platforms is advertised on the Season Three DVD and was released in March of 2008. Most notably, the show has featured two Alternate Reality Games, demonstrating the influence of creator J.J. Abrams on the show. Briefly, the Alternate Reality Games were essentially viral marketing that utilized television commercials, phone numbers, e-mails, actual products (such as candy bars and puzzles) to provide fans with a series of puzzles and clues. These clues led fans down a path that deepened the mythology of the show. This type of campaign has since become the signature of Abrams, most notably represented through his January 2008 hit movie *Cloverfield*. The marketing for the movie began with an unnamed trailer and continued onto media conventions, websites, and even fictional MySpace pages. The movie itself featured a new media technique. The entire film was shot with a hand-held camera and the character holding it often spoke, highlighting the “non-expert” individual’s perspective. What is important to note about both of these examples, the ARGs and *Cloverfield*, is that they represent an emphasis on how new

technology, especially the internet, has granted volume to the voice of the individual contributing to the story of seminal events (such as a monster attack on New York City).

Lindelof has been open about his respect for the internet and its aid to the fans. He said: “It has helped fans understand certain aspects of the show better. Certainly, the clues all add up to something, and it helps considerably that fans can pool their collective knowledge” (“Hit’s fans get lost in online speculation”). While the comments signal a shift away from the network culture to a more top down culture (Lindelof is providing the clues and the fans are compiling them), the perspective on the internet that this quote demonstrates should not be denied. If Lindelof thinks the internet allows fans to understand the clues more easily, he can leave more intricate clues. He can push the television medium by doing such things inside the show as having the character Walt speak backwards (following the episodes, fans downloaded it to their computer and reversed the speech to discover what was said) and such things outside the show as the already noted ARGs. I have already established how the producers listen to the fans and if you couple that tendency with their respect for the internet and new technologies, it is easy to see why script coordinator Gregg Nations frequently posts on the official message board “The Fuselage.” He has an entire section dedicated to him along side the actors’ section (which are must less frequently used) in which he answers questions.

Perhaps the most telling detail that reveals just how much influence the fans have on *LOST* is that the studio has allowed an end date to be set for the show. Stephen King addressed previous shows being hurt by the lack of an end date and applied it to *LOST*: “But they all also face a huge problem, a.k.a. the Prime Network Directive: Thou Shalt

Not Kill the Cash Cow” (“*LOST*’s Soul). Apparently, the “Prime Network Directive” has been abandoned. Following the end of Season Three, Lindelof and Cuse struck a deal with ABC to produce a finite number of more episodes (48) and seasons (three) in order to give the show an end date. Cuse noted the uniqueness of the occasion: “It’s practically unprecedented in network TV to announce the end of a show this far out” (“One mystery solved: *LOST* to end in 2010”). The primary question Lindelof attributed to the fans (“Are you making it up as you go along?”) was answered with such a resounding “no” that it even overrode the “Prime Network Directive.”

The voices of the fans of *LOST* are being heard in a way that fans of a show have never been heard before. Dickens never had such easy access to his fans. Maybe if he did we would know the answer to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, or, at least, it would have developed differently. With *LOST*, we can at least to begin to consider if Lindelof and Cuse are the creators of the show or the caretaker.

Thus far in this chapter I have chronicled the culture of *LOST* from the producers’ perspective. In my next section, I will flip perspectives to that of that fan, using the example of one message board to demonstrate how they utilize techno-literacy to build and support ideology.

The Fishelage ~~vs.~~ and The Fuselage

A main feature of the online *LOST* community, as it is a main feature of many online communities, is a system of message boards. These boards include “The Fuselage.com: The Official Site of the Creative Team Behind ABC’s Award Winning TV

Show *LOST* Sponsored by J.J. Abrams,” a forum run by one of the longest running fan websites Lost-TV.com (<http://www.losttv-forum.com/forum/forumdisplay.php?f=44>), “the Numbers forum” inspired by the show’s infamous 4-8-15-16-23-42 sequence (<http://www.4815162342.com/forum>), the extremely popular Lost-Forum.com (<http://lost-forum.com>), a forum run by a popular television recapping site “Television Without Pity” (<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showforum=707>), the forum at LOSTpedia the *LOST* wiki named the #3 fansite on the web by *Entertainment Weekly* (<http://forum.lostpedia.com>), and forum run by *LOST* blogger “The Fish” called “Fishbiscuitland” (<http://fishbiscuitland.com/Fuselage/phpBB3>). In this section, I will recount my personal experiences with The Fuselage and Fishbiscuitland, specifically focusing on the creation of Fishbiscuitland, in order to demonstrate how individuals utilize their techno-literacy to create communities that share and reflect their ideologies.

As I explained earlier in reference to the official *4400* message board, I have never used internet forums as more than an information resource. I enjoy speculating about the stories and characters of shows I watch and internet forums were a natural place for me to journey for such speculation. It was not until I began posting at The Fuselage that this speculation turned political. Over the first season or so of *LOST*, I was more of a casual theorist. I came up with ideas, posted them, and went about my business. As I explained earlier, Season Two saw me begin an online column. This column saw me delve deeper into theorizing. Following Season Three, I posted several theories on The Fuselage under the moniker of MyNameIsntEarl. The longest post would land me in the middle of a political controversy that I had no idea existed.

To summarize a longwinded composition in a few words, my theory speculated the notion that the character of Jack Shepard might be a fallible variation on the hero archetype and thus incorrect in a crucial statement he made in the final episode of Season Three. Before long, my post was deleted and my ability to post at The Fuselage was restricted. The Fish describes the events differently on her blog:

Now this most excellent post, too long to quote here, was treated to the typical Fuse treatment – where they act like antibodies attacking the invading viruses. You know how it works. First they mutilate the post with *MOD EDITS*...then they berate the poster from place to place before they throw up their hands and shitcan the whole thing. (“To Fuselage or Fishelage, That is the Question...”)

What is interesting about her statement is not the affection she has for my post, but the disdain she has for The Fuselage. She describes their “typical” activities as “mutilation,” “berating,” and “shitcanning.” These words are in reference to the moderation of posts. Clearly, she does not approve of the way The Fuselage moderators tend to the board they are assigned to watch over.

The Fish narrows her critique of the power holders at The Fuselage to a specific issue later in her post. She states: “Because there’s one thing you can NOT discuss on the Fuselage: YOU CANNOT DISCUSS JACK. In anything other than hushed, respectful...or giddy, wetpantied...tones. The main character. Off limits” (“To Fuselage or Fishelage, That is the Question...”). In other words, my post was hidden because it critiqued Jack rather than praised him. At least, that reason is what The Fish believes. It

also has a lot to do with why she began her journal to begin with. In an email interview, she said: “The reason I started the journal, to vent. Basically I was tired of being told how to act and conform. It’s more about freedom of expressing myself and allowing others to do the same.” Her response is a first hand example of an individual utilizing technoliteracy to take advantage of the available network culture. Do you not like what a other people are saying? Start a blog and enter your voice into the conversation. Become a YouTube commentator (a current trend) and use your webcam to record a monologue of your opinion. Doing so might even get you noticed. Professional wrestling promotion TNA recently gave two amateur YouTube commentators an official show with their promotion called *TNA Addicts* (2/28 TNA Addicts Audio Show Online). What is even more important about The Fish’s story though is how she continued to forge ahead with only the support of a few fellow fans.

Following the incident that was the posting of my analysis of the Season Three finale, I received a private message on The Fuselage inviting me to post on another board. I had discovered Fishbiscuitland, a forum created by “The Fish” that became the home of fans of the characters of Sawyer and Kate and their relationship, whatever it may be. The success of the board is demonstrated by over 400 registered users and a strong core of users who post every day or, at least, following every new episode of *LOST*. In an interview I conducted with her, The Fish admitted she was shocked about its popularity: “This board has surpassed anything I could have imagined.” She even discussed her initial perceptions of the demand for the board in relation to her creating it: “There was a slight lag in creating the board. Wasn’t sure if it was going to be received as

well as it has been. More and more I heard how unhappy certain parties were and I knew how much I loved being able to feel free and wanted to share that.” She created the journal, witnessed its success, and then decided to create the board. The exigency of the situation created by the moderators and users of the other boards is not lost on her either. I asked her directly about the link between Fishbiscuitland and the love for the characters of Sawyer and Kate, and she responded: “I let them speak openly because they don’t get the freedom on other boards. They are chastised for liking the underdog character so this gives them the outlet to banter and confront if they want to discuss all aspects of the show and not just Sawyer and Skater views.” In other words, all of these users were looking for a network that allowed them to choose the culture they wanted to be immersed in, and The Fish answered that call by creating a lateral move, not to exalt one perspective or opinion over the other, but to allow other fans the ability to choose what they want to take off of Bolter’s supermarket shelf. And from the beginning of her board, The Fish has always been careful to stress just that point: “I wouldn’t want to shut down any discussion on the Fuselage – from the analyses of the Valenzetti equations to the roleplaying of *LOST* characters in Disney movies. It’s all good. If it helps soothe the miseries of bitter yentas or lonely geeks to bash on sexy Sawyer, I say that’s what make believe characters are for” (“To Fuselage or Fishelage, That is the Question...”). She isn’t looking to shut down conversation, but open it up. And the users of Fishbiscuitland certainly agree with her.

In “Polls: Links and Discussion” section at Fishbiscuitland, I created a thread with several questions regarding the posters’ usage of the board. I received 11 responses that

more or less contained similar information. Six of the respondents discovered the board through an initial appreciation of The Fish's writing, while three of the respondents were informed of it by another member, such as I was. Thus, we can see how "word of mouth" and lateral movements, not vertical, are utilized in network culture. Users seek out material they enjoy and are linked from there or reach out to other users with similar interests to continue the conversation. User night_sky_dream demonstrated both of those uses of techno-literacy in her response: "I started reading Fish's journal and then after people at LF got banned/warnings...a lot of people came over to FBL to be able to post freely." When asked what keeps them "coming back" to the forum, user iamme's response essentially encapsulated everyone else's: "At the beginning it was the fact that it was a place where I could talk with others who loved Skate [Sawyer and Kate] as well. And also the immense freedom we have here compared to other boards. But now I just come back by habit and the fact that there are so many cool people here. It's a community, and a wonderful one at that." The initial appeal was the ability to take what they wanted off the shelf, but what keeps everyone returning is the "community" and "cool people" they have created and been introduced to. They have used their techno-literacy to find people who share their values and opinions. Likewise, eight of the 11 respondents considered Fishbiscuitland their "home" board (when asked directly if it was) and stated that they rarely visit other boards anymore. User CapricaSix summed up the statements: "FBL is like my favorite bar, you walk in and here are your favorite people, you just hang out and have fun and pretty much laugh your ass off!" Instead of Bolter's supermarket metaphor, CapricaSix has subbed in the image of a bar, which is

arguably more appropriate. Whereas in a supermarket the shelves are stocked and you must choose from those products, the emphasis in a bar (besides the drinking) and in CapricaSix's use of the metaphor, is the atmosphere and possibility of discussing whatever you want. The bartender does not set the conversation, the patrons do. However, amidst all of this positive analysis of Fishbiscuitland, it is important not to lose The Fish's point about the value of other forums and sites. User Saska echoed this statement eloquently:

I read a lot of boards because I like other points of view about the characters, themes and mythology of the show. I lurk at TwoP because the debates are really good. I occasionally post at the Fuse and Lost Forum. I like the groups and ships threads and episode threads at the Fuse. I check out Lost Pedia, Lost-Media, the Tailsection on a regular basis.

The online *LOST* community is an intricate structure of sites that a user can choose to navigate anyway he wants. To extend the bar metaphor, browsing the network is like going downtown. You have your favorite bar, but the other bars are still open, each with their own personalities and atmospheres. If you want to change locations (and thus expose yourself to other voices, values, opinions, etc) all you have to do is walk (or drive) down the street.

“See you in another life, brother.”
Desmond Hume, *LOST*

In an homage to the influence of Charles Dickens on their show, Lindelof and Cuse incorporated a unique trait into one of the characters they introduced in Season

Two. At the bottom of the mysterious hatch lived Desmond, a Scotsman who always carries with him a copy of Dickens' novel *Our Unusual Friend* because, as he describes it, he has read every "wonderful word" Dickens wrote, except for that book and wants it to be the last thing he read before he died. Since his introduction, Desmond has become an integral and unique character in the sense that he introduces an element to the story that no other character does. For instance, in the Season Three episode "Flashes Before Your Eyes" Desmonds begins interacting with his flashback with knowledge of the future, something no other character is able to do. In the Season Four episode "The Constant," he loses track of himself in this shifting between flashbacks and the present. It is not until his adoption of a "constant" in both time periods that his mind is able to stabilize. In this network culture, we are all like Desmond.

Desmond David Hume shifted between time periods, interacted with the characters there, and carried information back and forth, in the manner of techno-literate users. *LOST* fans can easily go from "the Numbers" forum to the TWOP forum to Fisbiscuitland, disseminating and gathering information at each stop. Or, perhaps, they can start (or end, if there is a difference) their browsing by editing LOSTpedia with the new information they garnered or figured out from the latest episode (or magazine interview or blog or podcast or etc). In the end, the situation is really like the statement Desmond makes whenever he says farewell: "See you in another life, brother." It is brevity that at once both acknowledges his believed equality with others and his belief in the transient nature of things (which was perhaps a bit of foreshadowing of his soon-to-be transient life by the producers). He interacted with the people and place while he was

there, but it is time for him to go, and if he ever sees the other people again, everything will be different. Likewise, when a user hops from bar to bar downtown, everything is different every time and all he can do is choose what he wants to do and say while he is there.

CHAPTER FIVE

PARTY ON, DUDES: INTRODUCING POP CULTURE INTO THE CLASSROOM

“Four score and seven minutes ago, we, your forefathers, were brought forth upon a most excellent adventure conceived by our new friends Bill and Ted. These two great gentlemen are dedicated to a proposition which was true in my time, just as it’s true today—Be excellent to each other and...party on, dudes!”

Abraham Lincoln, Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure

Bill S. Preston Esquire and Ted Theodore Logan are a teacher’s worst nightmare. More concerned with their fantasy rock band Wyld Stallyns than anything going on inside the classroom, the duo laces their speech with heavily vernacular phrases such as “dude,” “excellent,” and “bogus,” and lives their life by the simple motto of “Be excellent to each other and party on, dudes.” In a last attempt to motivate the pair, their history teacher falls back on the old grade argument, telling them they have to pass the final project or they will fail the class. While the threat does not fall on deaf ears, the friends have no clue where to begin. Luckily, a man from the future named Rufus delivers them a time traveling phone booth which they utilize to gather famous figures throughout the annals of time. Through their excellent adventure, they not only pass history, but experience it. The two most disinterested students complete the most interesting journey and project and pass with time-traveling colors. Unfortunately for the rest of us, though we likewise wish to send students on their own excellent adventures, there is no such device as time-travel technology. Thus, the problem of motivating Bill and Ted remains. To solve it, I intend on furthering the arguments I have begun with my earlier chapters.

By this point I have established the importance of pop culture items as reified objects of ideology in the social construction process. I have also discussed the concepts of techno-literacy and network culture and their influence on these reified objects. In this chapter, I will place these concepts together in the context of the classroom. My goal is to emphasize the importance of using pop culture items in the classroom to help students become critical consumers of the social construction of ideology, and to help motivate them. I will begin by delving into a discussion of the general concept behind an idea often labeled with such terms as “pop culture pedagogy” and “media literacy” and then transition into specific recommendations for incorporating pop culture into the classroom setting. I will demonstrate these points by referencing several first hand accounts of the use of such reified objects in the classroom, focusing on the role of the instructor and the reactions of the students.

“It seems to me the only thing you've learned is that Caesar is a ‘salad dressing dude.’”
Mr. Ryan, *Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure*

In the case of Bill and Ted, Mr. Ryan acted as the representative of the education community. However, rather than seeking out new and creative ways to educate the guys, he relied on the cliché tactics of belittling their intelligence and threatening their passing to the next grade level. These reliance on clichés is more than likely a result of the story telling technique of the movie (the writers want us to sympathize with Bill and Ted, not the overbearing power structure of education), but it can still lead us down the path of our discussion. How exactly do you motivate students such as this duo of dudes?

Steven Golen points out this specific case of lack of motivation as the “laziness factor.” In his article “A Factor Analysis of Barriers to Effective Listening” he explicates several factors that hinder listening. He grounds these factors in academic and organizational settings. Most relevantly, he says the “‘laziness factor’ shows that students tended to avoid listening because of the complexity of the subject and the time required to listen effectively: “Perhaps these results may show the students’ indolent attitude toward their academic environment” (33). The more incomprehensible and irrelevant a subject seems, no matter how important it actually is, students tuned out because they simply did not want to invest the time and energy into the process. But what if there was some way to subvert, divert, or minimize the amount of time and energy needed to engage in the process? Here is the first place I would like to insert pop culture.

A context that students already understand and participate in will help them transition to new and unfamiliar contexts. The apparent link between a pop culture item and a topic will provide footing and will serve as a context bridge. In their article “Using Pop Culture to Get to ‘Araby’” Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet make this exact contention, “...one of the most effective ways to tie students to classroom material is by presenting the material through references to a world they already know and value” (75-76). While I have thus far only mentioned that students’ prior knowledge of material is important, Blythe and Sweet highlight the importance of their valuing the material. These two concepts are surely equally important. A student may know all about material, but if he places no value on it, the likelihood of him motivating himself to engage with it is

probably low. Would Bill and Ted have engaged with the material in their history class if they were not personally involved with it? Without their first hand journey through time, which featured the creation of friendships of historical figures, I doubt they would have. Still, though pop culture may provide a tool for motivating students, that use alone is not sufficient reason for bringing it into the classroom. Students would surely respond to bribes of money, but I doubt anyone would support that method.

Here I would like to re-introduce Paulo Friere's educational philosophy. To reiterate a point from my introduction, in his article "The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom and Education and Conscientizacao," Friere stated the importance of teaching students to "name the world" rather than "memorizing an alienated word," emphasizing the importance of action over passivity (402). Obviously, moving students away from the "laziness factor" emphasizes action over passivity. However, it is more important to note the need to, "...motivate students to continue learning and both evaluating media critically outside the classroom" (Gray 225). This need echoes Friere's point of naming the world. By not only learning, but evaluating what he learned, a person would be increasing his ability to "name the world." The simplest way to encourage this development of the thought process outside the classroom is to begin it inside the classroom.

In situations where pop culture is already utilized, it has been noted that the "...curricula often examine the media text with the goal of helping students become critical readers who challenge not only the media but also the dominant ideology" (Scharrer 37). This goal is exactly what Friere is pointing to, and it returns us to our

discussion of reified objects. By highlighting the human input and the object as the output of the reification process, we focused on the fact that it is an ongoing cycle of construction that uses its own products as bargaining chips for ideology. By bringing in these “media texts” and putting forward this perspective, students can begin to see the connection between the inputs and outputs and ideology. In her article “Ideology, Life Practices, and Pop Culture: Why is This Called Writing Class?”, Karen Fitts notes this outcome stating that bringing these texts to students “... involved sharpening their awareness of the many sites of struggle we encounter in everyday life and...scrutinizing the way words and images in popular culture shape what we as a society do, think, or believe” (95). In the case of *Bill and Ted*, traveling through time required them to think in new ways. By forcing them to think that way, they were able to apply those methods when they returned to the present. Likewise, by grounding critical thought process skills in pop culture, it provides a context students already understand, so they can both practice the new skills in familiar territory and see how they can look at this familiar territory in a new way.

Fitts notes that this technique is accompanied by a “shift from narrowly writer-focused to more broadly writer- and audience-focused planning” and that the students “...begin to recognize that they are taking part in a dialogue” (96). This turn to writer *and* audience focused planning demonstrates exactly the awareness of the input and the output of the reification process that I am describing. Students begin to see the text from both perspectives, the creator and the consumer, and can move closer to the perspective of seeing themselves as participants in both roles. More specifically, they can move

closer to understanding that they already participate with pop culture in such a way, "...in everyday practice, when viewers watch popular media for entertainment, most of them actually produce meanings within the dominant ideology and receive pleasure from it. Even though the media text is open to interpretation, it has a 'framing' power that limits the range of the decoding and the discussion" (Scharrer 38). Thus, they can move beyond simply working within the frame, or using the reified object in one mode of evidence, to questioning the frame. Returning once again to our example of Bill and Ted, the pair was able to discover new means of exploration on their own because they were thrown into the situation, essentially, alone. Though they began by trying to communicate with the historical figures in their contemporary methods, they quickly discovered that they had to tweak their communication based upon what era they were in.

This use of pop culture can be likened to a point made by Jay David Bolter. Fitts claims:

The softening of high/low distinctions allows us to better understand what our society permits, honors, or disregards; it also indicates to students the valuable connections between one's education and one's everyday life.

The need becomes more evident to think critically about a variety of what might be called "life practices" (e.g., watching a movie, listening to a political ad, conducting a romance, signing an informed consent medical document, and taking part in other culture forms). (91)

By bringing pop culture items into the classroom, Friere's method of thinking is not only modeled in the sense that the students are beginning in a familiar context, but that they

will see that they can take classroom thought processes outside of the classroom; for if you bring things outside the classroom into the classroom, why can you not take things inside the classroom, outside the classroom? This idea parallels Bolter's notion of the blurred lines between high and low culture. In fact, Fitts even uses the same terminology. Even more credence is found in her point then. Not only will students be shown that the discourse between education and "life practices" can be reciprocal, but, according to Bolter, they *should* be reciprocal. If we were to categorize our two current topics as "high" and "low," the classroom would surely be "high" and pop culture would surely be "low." However, we can now see how the classroom should be like any "bar" a person chooses to walk into, and how using pop culture emphasizes that point to the student. Especially in higher education, the student needs to choose to be in the classroom, and the student needs to choose those thought processes outside the classroom. Thus, we have reached a direct relationship between the use of pop culture and Friere's notion of "naming the world." A student has a choice to do both whenever he desires and needs to be aware that the choice is his. However, one more than slight problem still exists when use pop culture in the classroom.

I return to the point with which I began this thesis: the term "pop culture" refers to a wide array of items. I restate this point to raise the myriad of concerns that lurk under the surface. Where do we draw the line in deciding what is pop culture and what is not? Is watching a NCAA March Madness basketball game pop culture? Is a soap opera pop culture? Just because something is pop culture, does it have value? If so, what is the value of VH1's *The Flavor of Love*? Or, to state it more succinctly, "...a dilemma exists

in how to teach this. This problem is exacerbated by the vagueness inherent in the monolithic term ‘media’” (Gray 224). Likewise to media, the phrase “pop culture” carries with it a monolithic characteristic. It is possible to once again return to Bolter’s blurring of high and low to state that “pop culture” could be validly defined as anything and everything. In a way, I am defining it just that way by using a definition put forward by Kathryn Gullo in her article “Pop Goes the Classroom”: “Pop culture is the current culture of a society. It includes aspects of everyday life including clothing, cooking (or, at least, consumption of food), mass media, and entertainment including popular music, internet sites, television, film, radio, video games, books, comic books, and toys” (9). This definition leaves the discussion open, but puts forward enough concrete objects in order for us to have a mutual understanding. It is more than simply “anything and everything,” for it is grounded, but is still vague enough in phrases such as “aspects of everyday life” and “mass media and entertainment.”

I will say that much of what to use (and how to use) should be left up to the individual teacher (or whoever makes those choices). However, over the remainder of this chapter I will put forward a list of suggestions for the process of selection and use. First though, I would like to highlight a point raised by Patricia A. Duff in her article “Intertextuality and Hybrid Discourses: The Infusion of Pop Culture in Educational Discourses”: “Pop culture is a potentially rich, powerful and engaging classroom resource but one that is perhaps less globally accessible than is often assumed and should therefore be examined carefully” (261). The accessibility of pop culture items may vary from year to year, classroom to classroom, or student and should thus always be used with careful

consideration by the educator. For example, *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* was first released in 1988. While I hope I have made it accessible to all my readers, it may not be as accessible to younger readers. However, I weighed the rhetorical considerations and went ahead with my choice. In my next section, I will put forward some rhetorical considerations when using pop culture in the classroom.

“First, your return to shore was not part of our negotiations nor our agreement, so I must do nothing. And secondly, you must be a pirate for the pirate's code to apply, and you're not. And thirdly, the code is more what you'd call ‘guidelines’ than actual rules. Welcome aboard the Black Pearl, Miss Turner.”

Captain Hector Barbossa, *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*

In the classroom, as with any medium and information, there are important considerations we must address when deciding how to disseminate our words. However, when it comes to using pop culture in the classroom, there is not a plethora of texts about such considerations. Additionally, the considerations that are written about are buried within the texts. Nowhere is there a clear list of ideas that should be taken into account when introducing pop culture items into the classroom. It is my intention to provide such a list over the remainder of this chapter. This list by no means should be regarded as complete. I recognize that it is impossible for one person to read and dissect every article on a given subject, meaning I surely missed some articles, and that any genre and topic is always growing as more voices and information are added to the conversation. The following list is my contribution to the conversation.

In order to discover what concerns are important, I read several articles that chronicled the first hand use of pop culture in the classroom. Several discussed specific

materials: “Using the Pop Culture Bridge to Get to ‘Araby’” by Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet, “Staying True to Disney: Students’ Resistance to Criticism of The Little Mermaid” by Chyng Feng Sun and Erica Scharrer, “Taming Ten Things I Hate About You: Shakespeare and the Teenage Film Audience” by L Monique Pittman, and “Television Teaching: Parody, The Simpsons, and Media Literacy Education.” Other articles discussed using pop culture in the classroom more generally: “Digital Media and ‘girling’ at an elite girls’ school” by Claire Charles, “Bridging the Pop-Culture Gap” by Romaine Washington, “Pop Goes the Classroom” by Kathryn Gullo, “Ideology, Life Practices, and Pop Culture: So Why is This Called Writing Class” by Karen Fitts, and “Intertextuality and Hybrid Discourses: The Infusion of Pop Culture in Educational Discourse” by Patricia A. Duff. From these diverse articles I gleaned a list of four major concerns when integrating reified items of popular culture into the classroom. First, you must create a “safe place” for the students. Second, you must draw on the students’ experiences. Third, you must be careful not to destroy the escapism of these items for the students. Finally, you must be particular about what types of pop culture you allow into your classroom. In the pages that follow I will address each of these items individually, breaking them down with specific examples and quotes from the articles.

Create a safe place

The creation of a safe place involves cultivating a relaxed and welcoming environment that supports multiple view points. Pop culture items can often have important meanings to students, and they need to feel that they can defend or attack what

they want, or they will simply choose not to participate. Fitts describes the need thusly: “When students are asked to help create a community of dissensus in the classroom, they are more likely to see themselves as authors (authorities) engaged in the critique of popular culture and in rewriting their own life practices” (101). What is interesting about this quote is how Fitts separates “popular culture” and “life practices.” While it may seem as if students are simply “engaged in a critique” of reified objects, they may also, in fact, be involved in “rewriting their own life practices.” Thus, while they may be eager or able to adapt to/adopt their role as “authorities,” they may have trouble with it because it threatens what they are accustomed to. This possibility must be addressed.

Fitts answers this concern by opening up the discussion, “...it is important that as many perspectives as possible be carefully examined, fairly examined, and held up beside others” (101). As so much may be intertwined in the class discussion, it is important to consider the discussions from all angles, as not to accidentally threaten a student to the point that he becomes disinterested in or tunes out the class. I wish to distinguish this point from the contemporary slur of “political correctness.” I do not mean that every idea and statement should be revered and considered above reproach. On the contrary, I mean that no idea should be revered and considered above reproach. However, when critiquing an idea, it can be done in a manner that distinguishes the student from the statement, so that the student does not feel that he is the one that is personally under attack and can see that he is indeed separate from these ideas and reified objects.

Charles explicates exactly such a situation in her article about “girlying” in early high-school-aged girls. In her class, she and another teacher attempted to begin

discussions about the representations of women and the media and how it personally affected the girls. She states that it is important to allow, "...young women safe spaces in which to articulate and explore their sexualities." She continues: "Such safe spaces are particularly important in the context of other girl power discourses that do not politicize the relationship between 'femininities' and 'sexualities'" (136). While this concept of a safe place was initially broad in her article, and she may have considered the classroom itself a safe place, she soon discovered that an educational environment itself is not sufficient in creating a "safe place" for students.

Through the use of images and discussion tools, Charles learned that mediation between a student and the discussion can help in making her feel comfortable enough to voice her point of view. Initially, Charles and her peer "...scrolled through PowerPoint slides and invited students to respond to each one." She found that: "The commentary that ensued was less animated than I expected with many students mumbling under their breath as I scrolled through the slides, rather than letting the whole group, including me, hear what they had to say" (140). The students did have something to say, they just, apparently, did not feel comfortable voicing it to the entire class. In a future class, Charles and her peer decided to remedy this situation by introducing further technology to the classroom in order to see if it made a difference to the discussion. They had students sign onto a chat program that various types of content could be uploaded to. They then, "...installed the PowerPoint presentation onto the content pod and ran a 'virtual discussion' in which students were invited to respond to questions from their laptops as each image was displayed." She noticed a marked difference between the two

different discussions. The computer based conversation was much more involved: “The chat lasted the most part of a 70-minute lesson and generated about 30 pages of transcript.” She added: “The students’ approach to the discussion in 2005 was much less inhibited and they seemed very less aware of a teacher’s presence as they expressed their reactions and thoughts regarding each image” (143). While the solution in this case seems simple, it generates a guideline we can use. If something seems uncomfortable for a student, encourage them to voice their opinion through a more mediated source.

Charles’ example points to the importance of techno-literacy as expressed in my previous chapters. Internet technologies are certainly one route to pursue. Alternately, you could have the students simply write about the subject and either read aloud or only you could read. These techniques may make the student feel as if she can speak without having to compete with or defend herself to classmates. Charles explains the students ease: “The feeling of being under ‘scrutiny’, associated with the modernist and feminist approaches to media education pedagogy, was removed with ACP and the students’ interactions with the media texts become more exploratory” (144). As I suggested earlier and pointed to with the idea of using more mediated communication methods, scrutiny is an important concept to consider. Students do not want to feel as if they are constantly or personally under the microscope. However, it is not the only concern for creating a safe space in the classroom.

Duff points to the specific example of ESL students when talking about the classroom setting alienating some students, emphasizing a point from the end of my previous section. She writes that the ESL students struggled with pop culture based

discussion and remained silent because, "...asking for explanations in class or attempting to enter into the discussions might open them up to ridicule and confirm their difference and otherness. Silence protected them from humiliation but it did not help them gain access to the valued cultural capital and practices of their English-speaking peers" (253). The key phrase in this description is "cultural capital." The experience of the ESL students is a perfect example of the way pop culture can work towards establishing a social hierarchy among peers. If someone does not know, or does not like, a pervasive reified item, it may cause him to be alienated or shunned from a group. Thus, this situation that Duff explicated can be extrapolated from specifically ESL students to all students. Pop culture items brought into the classroom should be open to questioning from all students. It is important to know the details of anything that is introduced to be able to properly explain it if one or more students do not have the same base knowledge as the other students. Few pop culture items are universal. While it may seem logical that everyone has heard about the rivalry besides the Boston Red Sox and New York Yankees, those students who do not pay attention to sports at all probably have not heard of it. When dissecting the major concerns for creating a safe place in the classroom, the role of the teacher must be specifically examined.

It is extremely important that the teacher not view himself as a "missionary," intent on saving or enlightening students through their discussion. In their comparison of the Disney Film *The Little Mermaid* with its source Hans Christian Anderson story, Scharrer and Sun explicate this exact point, stating to avoid "...the pitfall of the 'missionary approach' to media literacy." They explain further: "Students may not

accept teachers' positions on issues and material discussed in class. Rather, they may construct their own interpretations and lessons that run counter to the one the teacher is attempting to convey" (40). Rather than sticking to his critique or analysis in order to "best inform" the students, it is important that the teacher encourage these other constructions and interpretations, even if they run directly opposite of what the teacher was trying to convey or believes. If the students feel as if the teacher is simply trying to tell them that they are required to view a pop culture item in a new light, especially a negative one, they will cease participating all together, especially if they feel personally tied to the item, such as is often the case with Disney films. Duff narrates an example of a teacher acknowledging a student's pop culture contribution and further encouraging him: "M. Jones validates Doug's remarks about *The Simpsons*, by first uttering 'Great, and then...by affirming Doug's remarks, encouraging him to report the episode..." (243). Such an exchange between a teacher and student will encourage other students to bring up pop culture references or contribute to pop culture discussions in the future. Likewise, Blythe and Sweet think that the use of pop culture in itself works towards destroying the teacher as missionary perspective. They claim: "One difficult-to-measure bonus is the credibility and bond an instructor gains with the class; students see immediately that their teacher is not some ivory tower intellectual, but someone who lives in and understands their world" (81). The simple acknowledgement that the teacher knows that what students like exists can humanize him and create a rapport between him and the students.

In closing this section, I would like to put forward an example of how someone can make himself seem like a missionary without intending to. In her article in which she

compares Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew* to a recent movie adaptation of it titled *10 Things I Hate About You* in order to critique students' reactions to both, Pittman takes a position that openly favors the original play. She concludes: "The works open to larger questions of how to encourage students to become more critical consumers of popular culture—to resist the pleasing simplicity of sham certainty and learn to abide with comfort in the world of unending ambiguity so masterfully demonstrated by Shakespeare's plays" (151). I certainly agree with the first part of Pittman's statement, but the second half is troublesome. While I am not saying she cannot have a preference, if this statement were presented to students, they would surely react with indignation and might wonder if the movie was only presented to tear it down. Luckily, the statement was provided in an article and not a classroom, so it did no harm and can simply serve as a guide for us.

Draw upon students' experiences

One of the strengths of using pop culture is the educator's ability to quickly and easily create a mutual context for all the classroom participants. The simplest way to do so is to keep the students' experiences in mind when deciding what elements of pop culture to introduce. "Experience" is, of course, a multi-faceted word and, in order to reach a better understanding of my point, I turn to one of the articles I consulted. Duff addresses the issue: "Children and young adults naturally develop repertoires of fictional characters and stories that are part of their background knowledge, cultural repertoire, social practice, and indeed identity" (233). By focusing on what a student already knows,

it can be easy to transition into new discussions, as he will have tangible ground to hold onto. He may also be better able to remember new information if it is tied to older information.

Blythe and Sweet explicitly tie this discussion to emotional and formative experiences of their students. This twine demonstrates how parallels between “new” text (in their case, *Araby*) and “old” text (in their case, *The Wonder Years*) can aid the process. They describe, “...the odds are overwhelming that our students not only saw the show, but also have an emotional attachment because Kevin and Winnie’s experiences reflect their own” (77). Not only did they take into an account how pervasive of an experience viewing *The Wonder Years* was among their students, but they considered how much of an impact watching the series had on their students. They continue later: “Both stories employ the same basic plot, one with which students readily identify, the first crush” (78). Rather than simply saying “think about your first crush” or classifying *Araby* as a story about a first crush, Blythe and Sweet gave the students a concrete other example to hold onto. It is also important to note how the example is removed from the students, so while there is some emotional ties to the discussion, it is not too strong. While Kevin and Winnie’s story may reflect their experiences, it is not their experiences and thus may be easier to critique and discuss. Likewise, other articles reflected this use of a common ground experience aiding the discussion.

To address trouble students had grasping novels, Gullo introduced many pop culture elements into the classroom. She describes the reaction: “My students struggle with some texts because they do not have the breadth of background knowledge

necessary to understand *A Farewell to Arms* or *Cry the Beloved Country*. But they do have an understanding from movies, music, television and YA trade fiction of greater themes such as the terror of war or of racial injustice” (9). Thus, by introducing the movies, music, etc, into her classroom Gullo provided her students with the background knowledge they lacked in her eyes. Blythe and Sweet state this point more succinctly: “...pop culture gives students a way to feel they aren’t strangers in a strange land of Literature; they realize they have something from their own experiences to contribute to the conversation” (81). Their use of the word experiences speaks exactly to my point. The pop cultural items served as the middle link in the chain between student and material. Washington notices more tangible reactions by students: “As soon as Pink’s video began playing on the classroom TV there was classroom chatter...,” even telling a story of putting the concept of Romanticism into terms from their own experiences, “...and when I was asked a second time to repeat the definition, I simply said, ‘They were emos...As soon as the word ‘emos’ was used, pens were moving...” (13). In both cases Washington recounts, students had an immediate and measurable reaction when pop culture items they were intimately acquainted with were introduced. This perspective can do more than simply linking students to the discussion as well.

Using reified objects can provide a method of understanding students’ thought and communication skills. Pittman states about her comparison between film and source material that it, “...prompted strong ‘first readings’ in my students, readings that reveal students’ interpretive mechanisms when digesting the entertainment created for their consumption” (145). Gray echoes this point: “In the process of media consumption,

media literacy—one’s understanding of the medium, what one knows or expects of its structure, genres, and tropes, and how one has been trained to make sense of its messages, style, and rhetoric—is vital in determining what interpretations will be made of any given text” (223). “Any given text” can be the pop culture item or the “new” text introduced by the teacher. Thus, we have once again reached the idea of the conversation we are trying to encourage. By paying explicit attention to students’ experiences with pop culture, teachers can learn about their consumption methods so they may teach them new and diverse methods. The students can then use these methods within the classroom and, hopefully, turn around and re-apply them to both pop culture items they are already familiar with and new items they may consume in the future.

Do not undervalue escapism

Sometimes, when we all sit down to watch a movie or television, we do it to forget and relax, not to be a critical consumer who tries to figure out why and how the production was composed in that exact manner. In the classroom, it is important to not be so ardent about applying the same techniques to the pop culture items as the classroom items, as students may shut down completely, refusing to participate in the discussion. This suggestion is especially important when considering that many aspects of pop culture may, at face value or complete value, be created for the purpose of entertainment/escapism.

The most common place where we see this trend of students reacting harshly to the application of critical techniques being applied to pop culture items is in regards to

movies. Pittman noted how her students immediately blurted out escapist defenses of *10 Things I Hate About You*, "...one young pre-med/biology major blurted out with a touch of good-natured resentment, 'I just like the movie, okay?' Other students valiantly rose to defend *10 Things* and launched a number of arguments stressing the enlightened perspective on gender espoused by the movie" (144). As these reified objects are often crafted to resonate with certain members of our culture, they can often be so bound up with students' experiences that they do not realize why they identify with it, or do not wish to see it torn apart, at least not right away. However, more often than not, students are aware of why they "just like" the escapism of a movie, but still do not want it to be destroyed.

In their critique of Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, Scharrer and Sun noticed similar reactions to what Pittman observed, though students were much more forthcoming as to why they reacted in such a manner. Disney's animated features are heavily tied to childhood memories for many of us, a trend that still continues, even though Pixar's computer based animation has seemingly replaced "classic" animation techniques. Sun and Scharrer noted numerous student reactions. One of their students responded: "Analyzing a film can ruin it for me if people are totally one-sided about their interpretation of the movie" (46). Another wrote: "Sometimes even if the wrong messages are being portrayed the movie can still make you warm and fuzzy inside." A third explained: "Sure, I know that Disney changed the story in a major way, but I like happy endings and romance" (43). What all three students have expressed is the desire to have both interpretations and perspectives on the films remain. The students were able to

distinguish between the message and their enjoyment. Sure, they were open to the analysis, but not so much as to destroy the “warm and fuzzy” feeling or the “happy ending.”

The difference here exists in the modes of being critical and uncritical. Scharrer and Sun describe it: “The analysis of the text could signal an end to relatively uncritical entertainment and escape provided by many media experiences, replaced by dramatic, wide-sweeping questioning of many social institutions, media and otherwise” (41). While this type of thought is certainly exactly what we are trying to encourage by pointing out the ideology of reified objects, encouraging it to the point that students shut down makes the exercise futile. Instead, rather than ending the escapism and replacing it with the critical perspective, it is important to try and create a zone where the two different methods of consumption can co-exist.

It is also important to note how this concern is directly tied to the previous two I have noted. If a teacher turns into a “missionary,” a student may shut down because he feels as if the escapist element of a pop culture item is being completely undermined. Likewise, if a student is so tied to a pop culture item emotionally, he may refuse to participate in any discussion, as it threatens his understanding of his formative experiences. Thus, it is important to note here that none of these guidelines can be considered independently of the others. Rather, they always work together. The point of individually explicating them is to grant them each a fair understanding, so as to best prepare the classroom.

Types of pop culture to use

Through my readings, I distinguished two types of pop culture items that would be advantageous to introduce into an educational setting. The types of that can be used are, of course, not limited to these two. Additionally, these characteristics are reflective of the considerations we have already taken into account thus far in this chapter. The reified objects that would aid the learning process of students are ones that students have a personal stake in and that explicitly build upon other reified objects.

Since the goal is for students to continue the activities inside of the classroom when they are outside of the classroom, it makes sense to try and bring in pop culture items that will help them make this transition. The best type of items for this outcome are ones they have a personal stake in. Blythe and Sweet present the idea this way: “To inspire such a reaction requires students’ sense of involvement and interest to be significantly activated, and for them to feel a personal stake in the process. Thus, any television program that could provoke and encourage critical viewing skills could play a key role in media literacy education, especially in keeping the education alive outside of the classroom” (225). Of course, when personal stake is introduced into the equation, it is important to temper its usage with concerns raised earlier in this chapter. Personal stake can cause a student to become further involved, but it can also cause them to shut down. Scharrer and Sun do not see this resistance as necessarily a bad thing. They say it, “...provides opportunities for examination of some important issues media literacy educators need to grapple with” (54). Students resistance can be a hindrance, but it can also be an advantage if used correctly. It can often spawn the old cliché of “teachable

moments.” I raise the issue of students’ personal stake in order to make it a concept educators are aware of. Likewise, it is important to be aware of pop culture that explicitly “builds.”

When I use the term “build,” I openly refer, perhaps ironically, back to the reification process I explicated in my first chapter. In his discussion of parody, Gray describes a couple of such television shows, “...*The Simpsons* and *Ally McBeal* are themselves highly intertextual and multimodal as well with passing reference to a wealth of movies, TV shows, and literary classics in the former; and musical interludes to Barry White, in the latter” (244). Gray’s description of these two shows is reminiscent of our discussion of *LOST*’s intertextual nature in my third chapter. The producers are very open about the fact that they intentionally place books throughout the show in order to encourage viewers to read them, thus increasing the conversation between *LOST*, its viewers, and these works of literature. By bringing such pop culture items into the classroom, students would be able to see the conversation first hand and begin to place themselves in it.

Gray states how parody works on top of the form it mocks and thus, “...the grammar that conceals and carries these ideologies is threatened, allowing the possibility that a single text can modify our understanding of a genre to include an awareness of both is ideological apparatus and the strategies it uses to offer this ideology” (227). While he makes a strong case for the “building” effect of parody, what he describes is certainly not limited to humor. Rap, for instance, is a musical genre that is known for “sampling” various types of music and referencing other artists’ works, as well as an artist’s own

work. If educators bring these objects into the classroom, they can model the reification process for students, aiding their ability to pick out the way ideologies travel.

“Because we’ll never stop learning and we’ll never stop growing and we’ll never forget the ideals that were instilled in us at our place, ‘cause we are S.H.I.T.-heads now and we’ll be S.H.I.T.-heads forever, and nothing you can say or do or stamp can take that away from us. So go.”

Bartleby Gaines, *Accepted*

In the movie *Accepted*, protagonist Bartleby Gaines is so lazy that, despite his high intelligence, he does not get into any colleges (surely a reference to Herman Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*). He soon creates a college to appease the pressures of his dad, and, completely by accident, hoards of students that also were accepted nowhere, enroll in the school. What ensues is a completely student directed college experience that changes all involved in ways B, as he is known, could never have anticipated. In his final impassioned speech to the accreditation board, he denies asking for acceptance again, stating that what they learned and how they learned to learn will continue on outside of the classroom.

Incorporating pop culture into the classroom can have exactly the effect B unintentionally had. Whereas he told students to write what they wanted to learn on a giant whiteboard in the middle of the college and let them go on their way, we can ask students directly and participate in a conversation. However, whereas *Accepted* is a movie and in its escapism can do more fantastical things we must recognize the measure of control that educators actually have in the classroom. It is my intent for this chapter to

serve as both a theoretical basis for using pop culture items in the exertion of that control and a set of guidelines for when that control is exerted.

Finally, I recognize both the scope of this chapter and the ideas that I have mentioned here. The list in this chapter is by no means meant to be exhaustive or limited to the genres of English, Writing, Rhetoric, or Composition. In fact, many of the ideas I discussed in my guidelines (such as experiences and personal stake) are tied up in the field of psychology. It would be interesting to see a study done from such a perspective using the ideas put forward here. Regardless, I encourage you to consider building upon the ideas I have discussed here.

CHAPTER SIX

MEDIA, THE NATION, AND US: SHAPING OUR “FRAGILE LITTLE MINDS”

“It seems that everything’s gone wrong/since Canada came along./Blame Canada./Blame Canada./They’re not even a real country anyway.”
Parents of South, *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*

In a bit of self referential humor that has become a trademark of the series, *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone created a movie about the controversy they anticipated their movie would generate. In it, the four fourth grade boys sneak into an adult cartoon movie and it “warps their fragile little minds.” When the parents of the children find out (as all the other kids in town start sneaking in to view it as well) they blame the source of the movie, the birth nation of the two creators and stars of the movie: Canada. Parker and Stone are not Canadian, but the parallel between the duo and the two creators/stars of the fictional animated movie is clear. And while the movie makes a variety of points satirically, one specific idea applies here: there is no need to start a “full assault,” the aftermath following the movie is not “Canada’s fault.”

The fictional war between America in Canada over an animated film speaks directly to my term “mediation.” No longer is there a clear line drawn between politics, philosophy, and intellectualism, and pop culture, entertainment, and the media. The latter is so influential on the former that, while it does not cause any literal wars, metaphoric battles take place all over the cultural landscape. Parker and Stone designed their movie to be a direct representation, and satirical overplaying, of these battles. And their story began in the same place my discussion did, a reified object.

We began discussion by approaching the concept of reification. By tracing the historic roots of the term, beginning with Karl Marx, we learned what was actually meant by the term, providing further context to it rather than guessing at the assumptions of various thinkers when they used it in their work. In other words, “reification” is a concept entwined with economics. It originally began as the description of how we, as humans, attempt to quantify something that is difficult to quantify, human work. It has since been appropriated further into the quantity vs. quality debate, branching out beyond economics.

After Marx described the economic idea of reification, other thinkers tried to apply the concept to the quantification of thought. While there seemed to be a general distrust of the reification of thought, no thinkers explicitly mentioned thought. Rather, they focused on ideas, the product of thought. Additionally, there seemed to be no concrete description of a reification process. It appeared to be assumed that an idea was created and through repeated use by others, it became reified. That reification was then assumed to be troublesome.

To better grasp the assumptions and critiques surrounding the conception of reification, it was important to craft a more intricate conception of it. We began at the step before the idea, thought. It was important to focus on the main point of contention surrounding the issue: quality vs. quantity. This dichotomy became represented in the concepts human input and reified output. However, moving beyond the human input vs. reified output dichotomy was important, so we illustrated the process in a less linear manner than it had been previously. Most conceptions of the process simply moved from

human to object, seemingly ignoring the influence the object has on humans and other objects. Thus, the thought box process emphasized the repeatedly almost circular influence the human input and reified output have on each other the same way Parker and Stone emphasized it in their movie. The parents of *South Park* reacted in the dichotomous perspective. The movie existed in a vacuum and was to be blamed for the ills of their town. It could not be both a product and influence of the ills. By critiquing them within the story, the pair pointed out the falsity of that perspective.

To further demonstrate this point of dualistic relationships of person and product, we transitioned to a contemporary discussion of techno-literacy. In this discussion, the growing importance of the individual and his ability to influence these reified objects like never before is highlighted. Whereas in the world of *South Park*, the only option the parents seem to be able to use is “old” culture, protesting and grouping into a movement based upon geographic proximity until the televised media “covered” them, techno-literacy features greater opportunity for the individual to share his voice and find others who may agree or disagree with him. In contrast to their parents, the kids of *South Park* post an internet bulletin in an attempt to form a resistance group. Their group is formed much more quickly, and in just enough time save the day. Their perspective on the fictional animated feature was much different than their parents’ and was demonstrated in these differing approaches.

The divergent opinion of the kids from their parents was the logical implication of techno-literacy to pursue. If this technology allows us influence on reified objects like never before, does this influence affect culture at all? Jay David Bolter used techno-

literacy to break the dichotomy of high culture and low culture as we had broken the dichotomy between human and object. He used the metaphor of a supermarket to explain the new role of the consumer. His claim and metaphor were also demonstrated in Parker and Stone's fictional war between the United States and Canada. The war was not over immigration, oil, or religion. It was over an animated movie and the way the parents believed it was affecting the ideologies of their children, as evidenced by the tongue-in-cheek line "This movie has warped my fragile little mind." The satire of this situation would not cut so deep if Bolter's arguments had no credence. The apparent subsuming of his breakdown between high and low in our culture is hard to deny.

My third chapter featured such an example of a culturally reified object and how techno-literate culture is being used to shape it. Utilizing my personal experience with the community formed around the television show *LOST*, we discussed the role of the fans in the production of the show. First, we saw the importance of the perspective of the producers and creators in order for this culture to be effective. If they did not recognize or embrace the way their fans can more easily express themselves, then the fans would have much less of an influence on the reified object that is *LOST*. We also witnessed the ways in which the fans are using their techno-literacy to ensure their voices are heard. Specifically, they used the intricate system of intricate message boards created for and by fans of the show. The specific story of the creation of Fishbiscuitland demonstrated this application. The reasons for the birth of and subsequent use of the board by the creator and the users showed how a group of people sharing one specific viewpoint shared a haven where there was not one previously before. As mentioned earlier, Fishbiscuitland

mirrors the way the boys of *South Park* turned to the internet to setup a resistance movement, although the formation of the group in the movie was far less intricate than in real life.

What was garnered from the explication of this fan community was a deepened understanding of and slight twist on Bolter's metaphor. Rather than a supermarket, where the store is designed and the products put on the shelves by someone "over" the people who walk into, we came to the metaphor of a bar, which de-emphasizes the consumer aspect of a store and emphasizes the conversation aspect of techno-literacy. While a bar is still created and owned by someone "over" those who walk into it and a product is still be sold, there is much less of a defined culture regarding what people are supposed to do or talk about while there. A line of bars in a downtown area can each have their own separate culture that attracts a certain type of clientele. In contrast, in general, it can be said that supermarkets are designed to be generic. With this understanding, I then turned my discussing to the classroom.

Utilizing Paulo Friere's theory of education, we then considered the importance of using pop culture items in the classroom. When pop culture items are seen as reified objects of ideology, Bolter's breakdown between high and low culture is emphasized. Whereas it may have previously been said that only high culture affected ideology, as evidenced by the example of *LOST* in my third chapter and the example of the *South Park* movie in this conclusion, so called low culture is exerting greater and greater influence on our ideologies. We then discussed the more theoretical reasons for using pop culture in the classroom into an explication of a list of guidelines.

Though the use of pop culture in the classroom is certainly not a novel idea and is probably done quite widely, there was no concise and succinct list of do's and do not's when using such items. After considering several first hand accounts of pop culture education, or media literacy, the most common themes appeared to be: create a safe place, draw upon students' experiences, do not undervalue escapism, and what types of pop culture to use. Simply, these suggestions focused on emphasizing the role of the student and his perspective on these items, rather than telling him what the item is about, and ensuring that the student actually wanted to look at these items from this "new" perspective.

Having reached this point, it is important to note that the use of pop culture in the classroom is a young concept that is probably yet to be accepted by all members of our culture. As I stated in the conclusion to my fourth chapter, the technique would benefit from research by all disciplines, be it psychology, education, or architecture. Additionally, more specific case studies or ethnographies would provide further advice and ideas to be considered when attempting to undertake such pedagogy..

"Don't want to be an American idiot./One nation controlled by the media./Information age of hysteria./It's calling out to idiot America."

Green Day, American Idiot

I certainly do not agree with the sentiments of the band Green Day, but their popularity can't be denied. The relevance of this excerpt from their hit song "American Idiot" off their album of the same name is important to note. Ironically, the song itself acts as exactly the type of reified object in the "information age" that it is purporting to

rebel against. What is also interesting is the interplay it expresses between media and the nation of America. These lyrics speak exactly to the opposite interpretation of my title Medination. Whereas I am not attempting to cast the relationship between media and the nation in a positive light, they are most certainly casting it in a negative light.

The broader point to take away from an analysis of this excerpt is the way it fits into the idea of using pop culture in the classroom. When an album is so popular and expresses opinions such as with this Green Day song (or the complete opposite opinion), are the listeners silently accepting the ideology the band members are putting forward, or are they conscious consumers, implicitly aware of the process they (both the band and the listeners) are participating in? It is my hope that here I have demonstrated why it is important to ask such questions in the classroom and provided sufficient concrete groundwork for how to do it. Green Day's words are blunt and their disdain for the general American brushes me the wrong way, but I can agree that we are living in a Medination. However, rather than thinking that pop culture items "warp our fragile little minds," as the parents of *South Park* did, we should consider how they shape our minds and how we shape them, because those items become a whole lot "realer" when they lead to actions.

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