

Essay 2: Media and Perception

Purpose: To explore cultural assumptions, beliefs, or myths about a topic by analyzing a movie or TV show depicting that topic. You will discover what your primary source implies about your topic, and examine how these implications construct your perceptions and understanding of the culture in which you live.

Objectives: This essay will help hone the following skills: making an argument; analyzing filmed media, texts, and your own observations to support that argument; and writing with precision and concrete detail. In addition, you will continue to practice the following: identifying and examining the assumptions you have about your topic, clarifying your own purpose in writing, recognizing and discussing implicit meanings in written/filmed texts, using sources analytically, documenting sources correctly, and assessing the effectiveness of your response to the assignment and your writing overall.

The assignment: Jennifer Michael Hecht talks about the way our culture and the times in which we live color how we view our world. She argues that what a culture fears or values at a given historical moment impacts its beliefs about what is deemed beneficial or dangerous. Judgments are based on cultural perceptions rather than facts alone, and perceptions shift. As she points out: “[t]he process of weighing benefits is cultural and historical” (75), and she makes clear in several places in her book that these cultural perceptions are reflected in TV/film. **Your task:** Choose one of the options listed below and write a 3-4-page essay, analyzing what your primary source says about your topic. Create a clear, specific, “tense” thesis that argues what the primary source implies. In the body of your essay, support, explore, and clarify your thesis, using detailed and specific evidence from the primary source itself, one of the Hecht readings, and your observations. **Note that there are several steps to completing this assignment. You must choose, watch, and take notes on your primary source before you begin prewriting. I expect you will have specific, detailed, and thorough primary source notes to hand in with all drafts of this essay. Please note that reality shows for this assignment should not be news programs; see me if you have questions about this. Also: regardless of the topic, you are deciding for yourself what the primary source implies about our culture, based on how you see our American culture today.**

Options to choose from (choose one):

- **Drugs:** As we’ve discussed, Hecht’s text argues that a society’s judgments about any given drug are based heavily on that society’s values and beliefs, given its historical moment. For this option, choose *either* a movie *or* 1-2 episodes from a fictional or reality TV show that depicts drug use today (filmed/set within the last ten years). Write an essay analyzing what the movie/show implies about drug use, and how these implications reflect a currently held belief or value within our culture (be specific about the belief or value). In choosing the primary source and in writing the essay, also be specific about the drug(s) you plan to discuss, since the term “drugs” is vague. Are you writing about a specific drug? About illegal drugs in general? About antidepressants? In your essay, be sure to quote from Hecht. *Some questions for brainstorming: What are your own feelings about the drug(s) you are discussing and why do you have those feelings? Do your own assumptions about the use of this drug match the implications of the primary source? What is the significance of the primary source’s genre (comedy, drama, reality show) in terms of what it implies about drug use?*
- **Sex:** This topic is similar to the drugs topic above. The “Sex” chapter explores historical and cultural beliefs about what is deemed sexually acceptable (in terms of behavior, practices, depiction) during any given time period. For this option, choose *either* a movie *or* 1-2 episodes from a fictional or reality TV show that you think depicts how Americans feel about sex in this day and age. Your primary source should be filmed/set within the last ten years. Write an essay analyzing what the movie/show implies about our sexual culture. In choosing the primary source

and in writing the essay, be sure you are staying true to what *you* believe: It doesn't matter what another student might write; you are, in part, deciding and defining for yourself how you see sex to be viewed in our culture today. In your essay, be sure to quote from Hecht. *Some questions for brainstorming: What are your own feelings about the way sex is portrayed in the primary source and why? If, for instance, you find the characters to be too promiscuous or prudish, why? Do you think the primary source reflects "average American" beliefs and behaviors, or is it more fantastic? Why? Does the age, socio-economic class, or place of residence of the characters seem to have some impact on their behavior/beliefs? Do your own assumptions about sex match the implications of the primary source? What is the significance of the primary source's genre (comedy, drama, reality show) in terms of what it implies about sex?*

- **Money:** Though you didn't read the "Money" chapter from her book, Hecht brings up wealth again and again in a way that we need to think about. Her overall exploration of happiness requires a look into what role money might play in our perceptions of well-being and contentment. As with the first two topics, choose *either* a movie *or* 1-2 episodes from a fictional or reality TV show that depicts money or wealth in some significant way. Your primary source should be filmed/set within the last ten years, and it could be especially helpful (though not necessary) to work with a show/movie that takes our current recession into account. (If you want to work with something that doesn't, that's fine, but you will probably find it effective to make clear our current recession, and explore to what extent the movie/shows' views still hold true.) Write an essay analyzing what the movie/show implies about wealth. Narrow this for yourself—do you want to focus on greed? Simple comfort? Actual money or the stuff that money buys? Money as power? Your specific primary source, and your characters' relationships to and feelings about wealth, will help you decide where to focus and what argument to make. In your essay, be sure to quote from Hecht. *Some questions for brainstorming: What are your own feelings about the way wealth is portrayed in the primary source and why? Do you think the primary source reflects "average American" beliefs and behaviors, and what do you see as "average"? Middle class? Does the age, career choice, socio-economic class or place of residence of the characters seem to have some impact on their behavior/beliefs about money? Do your own assumptions about money match the implications of the primary source? What is the significance of the primary source's genre (comedy, drama, reality show) in terms of what it implies about wealth?*

Length: 3-4-pages, typed and double-spaced.

Audience: Imagine yourself in an academic conversation with Hecht or another writer studying popular culture (especially film/TV).

Essay Structure: Both drafts must be written in formal essay format (see syllabus), and must have all essay elements (like thesis and topic sentences). We will workshop these elements throughout the writing of this essay. We will also practice correct MLA style in-text quoting and citing.

Rubric: Look to the course rubric. In addition, I will pay particular attention to your ability to narrow the topic, find your own purpose, and delve beneath the surface. Also, I will weigh carefully the efficacy of your thesis as a complex argument, the specificity and relevance of your evidence, the depth to which you explore implications, and the thoughtfulness and thoroughness of your primary source notes and prewriting.

Due Dates:

- **10/5** First draft due. Bring two copies, as well as extensive and specific primary source notes on the TV show/film (primary source notes may be handwritten)
- **10/21** Final draft due. Hand in a hard copy of final draft, first draft with my feedback, and all p.s. notes, prewriting, and revision notes. Send turnitin copy (submit to Media and Perception folder) by 5:00p.m. today.