

Introduction to Media Criticism

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Key concepts, goals, and tools for analyzing media texts

1. What Is Media Criticism?

Aspect	Description
Definition	The systematic examination of media products (news, film, TV, digital platforms, advertising, etc.) to uncover meanings, ideologies, power relations, and effects.
Purpose	• Reveal hidden biases and assumptions • Assess credibility and ethical standards • Empower audiences to interpret media independently • Contribute to democratic discourse and accountability
Scope	Textual analysis, visual analysis, audience reception, production studies, and policy critique.

2. Core Theoretical Approaches

Approach	Main Focus	Representative Thinkers
Formalism / Textual Analysis	Structure, style, narrative techniques, semiotics	Roland Barthes, Seymour Chatman
Marxist / Political Economy	Ownership, profit motives, class relations, media as ideology	Herman & Chomsky, Antonio Gramsci
Cultural Studies	Audience interpretation, identity, power, representation	Stuart Hall, Henry Giroux
Feminist & Gender Theory	Gendered representations, patriarchy, intersectionality	Laura Mulvey, bell hooks
Postcolonial & Critical Race Theory	Colonial legacies, racial stereotyping, hegemony	Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak
Media Effects & Reception	How media influence attitudes, behavior, and public opinion	George Gerbner, Elihu Katz
Digital & Network Theory	Platform algorithms, data flows, participatory culture	Manuel Castells, Henry Jenkins

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Tip: Choose an approach that aligns with your research question; many studies blend several perspectives.

3. The Critical Process – Step?by?Step

1. Select a Media Text

- News article, TV episode, social?media campaign, advertisement, etc.
- Define the unit of analysis (headline, frame, visual, comment thread).

2. Contextualize

- Production: Who created it? Funding? Institutional affiliation?
- Distribution: Platform, audience reach, timing.
- Historical & sociopolitical backdrop.

3. Describe the Text

- Summarize content objectively.
- Note genre, format, key symbols, language, tone.

4. Apply an Analytic Lens

- Use concepts from your chosen theory (e.g., framing, hegemony, gendered gaze).
- Identify patterns, omissions, contradictions.

5. Interpret & Evaluate

- Ask: What meanings are being constructed? Whose interests are served?
- Consider potential impacts on audiences and society.

6. Support with Evidence

- Quote passages, capture screenshots, reference data.
- Cite scholarly sources that back your interpretation.

7. Conclude with Insight

- Summarize findings.

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- Suggest implications for media literacy, policy, or future research.
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4. Common Analytical Tools

Tool	What It Does	Example Use
Framing Analysis	Identifies how issues are presented (selection, emphasis, exclusion).	Examine climate?change coverage across outlets.
Semiotic Analysis	Decodes signs & symbols (denotation vs. connotation).	Analyze the color palette of a political campaign ad.
Narrative Structure	Maps plot elements, protagonists, antagonists.	Break down