

# Theories of Mass Communication: Analysis of Theories and Concepts to Content in Mass Media

Remy Ashe

*This paper examines different mass media content in an attempt to apply several theoretical lenses from the field of Mass Communication. Using the theories of the culture industry, uses and gratifications, cultural imperialism, and semiotics, it is seen that several patterns emerge, with the presence of multiple readings in the encoded media message, where the media content ranges from full-length feature films to television shows to print media. Based on the analysis, star power and cultural imperialism are among the highlighted motifs in the selected mass media texts.*

## Introduction

Beneath the colorful, effervescent, mesmerizing, and enticing exterior of mass media content lies deep, hidden machinery that works hard to inundate its consumers with equally deeply covert messages, popularized and showcased by the owners of the media. These messages influence their audience personally and socially, eventually creating a culture which is highly influenced by media. It is the purpose of this paper to probe beneath the surface of mass media and, through the lens of theories of mass communication, examine deeper meanings in the messages conveyed by some particularly interesting examples of media content. The methodology applied to this paper includes an analysis of four different theories/concepts: *the culture industry, uses and gratifications, imperialism and cinema*, and *semiotics*. These concepts/theories are discussed based on the original analyses of theorists and then applied to specific media content such as films, print media, and popular television shows. I aim to textually analyze the above mentioned media content using variegated theories, to understand the text in terms of its symbolic meaning and its relationship to the viewer. The purpose of this research is also to determine and analyze a

narrative pattern in the products of mass media and the philosophical bases on which these messages are produced.

This research is significant in that it uses different approaches in order to textually analyze media content so as to discover different meanings and provide an in-depth interpretation of the encoded messages in the garb of entertainment.

### **The Culture Industry**

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, two theorists from the Frankfurt school in Germany, were the first to define the term “culture industry” in 1947. Adorno and Horkheimer (1993) theorized a social structure dictated by the capitalist system and its relationship with mass media to produce and maintain a social culture based on deceptive work philosophies and social conditions. In this social culture the masses are misled into believing that the work of philosophy and social conditions offered by the capitalist class actually benefit them.

In the culture industry, culture is monopolized, standardized, and mass produced. Further, there is a debasing of higher culture and high art forms such as literature, music, and folk art. The products produced for the masses are identical, having the same form in everything. The identical structure of mass culture is transparent, revealing the “artificial framework” which it holds. Technology is rationalized as a dominant need for society; however, it is not the technology which holds true power in the society, but rather, the holders of the technology that do so in setting and manipulating the terms for their own vested interests. Amusement is given significance and replaces real personal connections and satisfaction. Amusement and a variety of products form a source of short-lived entertainment which is used to lure the masses into working so that they may acquire them. The ideology of luck holds immense power, which rationalizes the system of domination. The masses are fooled into believing that chance is the only influencing factor in the rise to power of certain individuals, as opposed to the manipulative exploitation of the labor of others. “Star power” is used significantly by the culture industry as a medium to make the audience suggestible to the unending range of self-similar products shown through provocative advertising, giving them the hope of deriving some sort of pleasure-seeking satisfaction. The system of the culture industry constantly strives to keep the masses occupied to prevent independent thinking so as to protect from being seen through its shallow and manipulative framework. The culture industry constantly strives to deceive its consumers by

making promises it never fulfills. These impressions formed the basis of the theory of the culture industry as put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer.

The theory of the culture industry can be generally applied to formulaic, male-driven Hollywood action films and related television shows. In this paper, the theory is used to evaluate a specific “superhero” type of film—*Batman Begins* (Nolan, 2005). Bruce Wayne’s character (portrayed by Christian Bale) embodies and displays several of the definitions and functionalities of the culture industry theory as defined by Adorno and Horkheimer. In *Batman Begins*, the superhero character is standardized as part of an intrinsic Hollywood story structure, where the hero is usually a male who derives power from the use of technological apparatus. This formula is used over and over again in several Hollywood films which operate on this ideology, such as *Spiderman*, *Jimmy Neutron*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Knight Rider*, *Streethawk*, *Airwolf*, and others. This characteristic which defines the hero of such films is standardized and mass produced, and is consistent with the culture industry theory. This formula for action films and genre especially for men is monopolized with the use of heavy action and violence crafted ever so skillfully.

The monopoly of films such as *Batman Begins*, which are commercially successful both in the United States and internationally, is achieved with the help of high production budgets, fanciful imagery, and mass production. The inherent character of monopolization and standardization of such films can be seen transparently through several other Hollywood films and television shows. Adorno (2001) inscribes this idea vehemently: “What parades as progress in the culture industry... remains the disguise for an eternal sameness; everywhere the changes mask a skeleton which has changed just as little [since] the time it first gained its predominance over culture” (p. 99).

According to the culture industry theory, there is an artificial framework which can be seen through clearly, and this applies to *Batman Begins* as well. This is a film full of special effects, violence, and gadgets, and displays itself as a shallow art form which is superficial and has an artificial framework, deceiving the audience by the glistening images, the use of technology, and a visual roller coaster with no real message. The character of Bruce Wayne shows how a male can be all powerful, only with the use of external power pulled from technology. This ideology creates a culture for audiences who see such films repeatedly—a standardization and mass production process put into use.

The eminence of technology is highlighted in the film as a source of accomplishing various ends. The film incorporates the marriage of technology and violence to resolve interpersonal and social conflicts. This ideology is

directly opposed to the preservation and use of high art (such as theater, music and literature) that is more traditional in nature; in this sense, action oriented films like *Batman Begins* do not serve higher art forms. Further, the isolation of Wayne symbolizes individualism, living in an industrialized urban world, which contrasts with the idea of *gemeinschaft* (Baran and Davis, 2005), hence inculcating and reinforcing a culture of individualism and a loss of close family and community ties.

The idea of amusement in *Batman Begins*, through the showcasing of technological gadgetry and flashy visual effects, is glossy but short lived and forms an escapist type of entertainment without really incorporating a sense of real internal power to solve conflicts. In the film, Wayne uses his gadgetry as his power. Throughout the film there is a rush of imagery which keeps audiences from thinking about real issues and makes them take a flight to fantasy. As described by Adorno and Horkheimer (1993), the culture industry holds its consumers in a hypnotic state. The ideology of luck which Adorno and Horkheimer talk about is seen in this film as well, where suddenly out of nowhere Wayne is granted a tailored custom-made outfit and gadgets, making him all-powerful almost overnight. This could be seen as a deceptive work philosophy since in real life everyone has to work and is almost never rewarded the same way as the elites are, even by luck.

As previously noted, the ideology of “star power” is heavily used in the culture industry. There is a similar signification in *Batman Begins* and other Hollywood films, such as when the superhero is idolized by the audience for his character and superficial power. As discussed by Adorno (2001), the ideology of the culture industry

above all makes use of the star system, borrowed from individualistic art and its commercial exploitation. The more dehumanized its methods of operation and content, the more diligently and successfully the culture industry propagates supposedly great personalities and operates with heart-throbs. (p. 101)

As a result, various products are manufactured creating an array of merchandise to capitalize on this idolization of the power of the character. The unending products are targeted towards children and extend all the way to adults in various forms, be it Halloween costumes, video games, action figures, and/or apparel sporting the character and the film. They make their way to boxes of cereals and collectibles at fast food chains such as McDonald's. In the case of related products such as Halloween costumes, whether racy or simple, the use

of star power to target viewers goes beyond just going to the movies, finding their way into ephemeral hedonistic pleasures which are offered up to their targeted viewers. This can be seen as a “commercial exploitation” as quoted above by Adorno and furthermore capitalizes on popular superheroes with subtle methods of operation.

The theory of the culture industry forms a very solid interpretation in classical Hollywood films (such as *Batman Begins*) of the existing status quo in society today in terms of messages in media such as films, television shows, or music videos and the resultant generated culture.

### **Uses and Gratifications**

Uses and gratifications theory emerged with the evolution of mass media theory. Earlier theories of mass media were based on the premise that the media was a powerful influence on the media consumer with uniform effects—it was assumed that media consumers absorbed media messages passively.

Uses and gratifications theory (Baran and Davis, 2005) presented a different approach to viewing the media-to-consumer information relationship. It was theorized that just as people have their own interpretations or readings of interpersonal communication, similarly consumers of media have their own interpretation of media messages transmitted to them. The audience actively and constantly participates in constructing meanings and is considered an active rather than a passive viewer; the theory takes into account the intellect and ability of audiences. According to uses and gratifications theory, the audience assimilates, selects from, and rejects media messages. The theory draws attention to the significance of how different audiences use and interpret any particular program in a quite different way from how the producer of the media intended it. Different individuals construct the media messages differently, based on their unique personalities. Since different people have different needs, they naturally gravitate towards those programs and messages that gratify and fulfill those needs.

In a similar vein to the “uses and grats” theory, Fiske (1991) talks about popular discrimination and how the “ability of the people to discriminate between the products of capitalism... should never be underestimated.” Fiske further emphasizes how discrimination plays a part in popular culture. If we look at mass media as a part of popular culture, the audiences in this sense discern and discriminate between the media products offered and use and find gratification suiting their psychic, cultural, or emotional needs. Fiske discusses

the linking of the meaning and pleasures which are produced from these products which pertain to conditions of everyday life.

In programs such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* or cooking shows on the Food Network such as *Paula's Home Cooking*, the element of uses and gratifications can be seen where the audience obtains a certain amount of information which is useful to them while experiencing some gratification from viewing the different episodes the program has to offer. In the case of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, women especially can relate to, find use of, and obtain emotional gratification for topics such as personal development and/or emotional reasons relating to the universal issues around their gender. The Food Network provides some sort of a practical use in terms of viewing recipes being brought to life and the viewer has something to learn and apply from it. The *Dr. Phil* show targets people who struggle with their day-to-day life/relationship issues. Although these programs are not really in-depth in terms of helping to take away the deep-rooted pain surrounding the viewer, it offers a sense of temporary, illusory comfort.

The approach of television programs such as *Dr. Phil*, which make promises that are never really fulfilled directly, touches on the idea of culture industry as addressed by Adorno—a constant striving to deceive its consumers by making promises it never fulfills. In addition, the content of *Dr. Phil* is antithetical to the Individual Differences theory, whereas in the former the uniqueness of human personality is not taken into account. The idea of a common formulaic solution to an issue disregards the factors of distinct personalities, interests, backgrounds, values, and beliefs of different audiences. *Dr. Phil* generalizes and “treats” the “patients” on screen superficially, without taking into consideration the fact that each person has a completely different mental makeup with a unique fingerprint. Moreover, the idea of cognition is not taken into account; instead a “one size fits all” approach is adopted which is sensationalized and even dehumanized in emotional care-giving. In this sense, emotional content is commoditized on shows like *Dr. Phil*.

Analysts such as Morley have offered critiques of uses and gratifications theory. According to Morley, the limitations of this theory are twofold. First, while it is true that messages can contain multiple layers of readings which each audience can extract in different ways, the dominant reading of a given program, i.e., the reading as the producer intended it, is still dominantly pronounced. Thus, the notion of having different meanings of a given media message in the “uses and grats” model does not hold a lot of strength as a whole. Morley goes on to discuss the fact that the theory emphasizes the psychological disposition

of media consumers while totally ignoring the social structure. While people may have different personalities and identities, on the whole a society shares a largely common set of values, which serve to condition the audience's perception of the media message. In other words, in spite of their personality differences people do end up, due to their common social values, having a generally uniform and common interpretation of media messages. Programs such as *Dr. Phil*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and other similar talk shows which claim to address psychological issues of middle-class American people, are not in-depth in terms of taking cognition and distinct personalities into consideration. Thus, they fail in their truly intended purpose and end up being argued about in a social context. A specific example of this can be seen in one of the episodes in *Dr. Phil* where the topic of discussion was a troubled child in the middle of his warring parents. Dr. Phil starts out by arguing the psychological impact on the child, but then it ends up being more of a social problem on a broader scale where divorce exists more commonly with visible effects on families.

The other criticism of the "uses and grats" model leveled by Morley concerns the real message encoded by the producer, as opposed to what the audiences derive independently. While there is the illusion that these programs aim to help people, the real message encoded into this program by the producers is the deification of the talk show hosts, convincing the audience that viewing their shows will somehow help them with their deep-rooted issues. The producers aim to greatly empower these talk show hosts in the eyes of the audience to make them stars, and then use the associated star power to promote other products or shows which support the aired show. For example, Oprah promotes books on her show, and also promotes actors along with shows in themselves. For example, Oprah had an entire show devoted to promoting *The Secret*, a self-help book and video. This is a case of product promotion, using star power to make the audience suggestible to purchasing a product. In a classic case of a star promoting another star, Oprah, in one of her episodic shows, introduced an Indian Bollywood actress, Aishwarya Rai, to promote her and her upcoming Hollywood film.

*The Oprah Winfrey Show* portrays itself as working for the "empowerment of women" and uses this as a basis to promote another female star. In accordance with the culture industry theory, by giving importance to stars, such shows also reinforce the ideology of luck: people rise to stardom, acquire wealth and power, or become "Miss World" (as Rai herself did) through chance or luck. The promotion of political candidates and/or social figures is a regular

feature of such shows, which also helps influence public opinion through the strong viewpoint of talk show hosts who are stars in themselves.

### **Imperialism and Cinema**

The concept of imperialism and cinema is examined closely by Shohat and Stam (1994). The authors discuss the rise of cinema within and in relation to an imperialist and colonial context. Under the control of the then dominant colonial powers such as France, Britain, and the United States, there was an imperialist ordering of the world under their far reaching regime which had an effect on the way cinema was produced, in a way to laud the colonial enterprise.

The cinema had overtones of imperialism cast by the imperialist countries—it became more influenced and favored the colonial regime. This was most pronounced in the 1930s. One of the roles the imperialist cinema sought to play was to distract the working class and neutralize their class struggle, instead transforming them into national and racial solidarity. The imperial ideology extended itself doubly to the Europeans. Firstly, they were encouraged to identify themselves not only as their own nations in themselves but also encouraged to recognize the racial solidarity fostered by the imperialism by itself. Secondly, the European regimes embodied the idea of cosmopolitanism, where different cultures and races would cohabit in the same colony. For the elites who lived in an urban area of a colonized land, they associated cinema-going with the sense of community with their fellow countrymen who were residing in those far off colonized lands. On the other hand, cinema also served to foster in the elites a sense of dislike towards the people who were colonized. Unlike the novel, cinema is not based on literacy; hence it reached out to a larger number of people, fostering group identities.

With the combination of storyline and spectacle, the imperialist cinema told its tale through the colonizers' lens. On one hand, the imperialistic films glorified colonialism as noble movements which strove to eradicate ignorance, disease, barbarism, and tyranny. Negative stereotyping of the denizens of the colonies in cinema served as a vessel to justify the cost of human lives in these endeavors. Racism was another common thread that ran through the imperialist films. Shohat and Stam discuss how the local inhabitants of the colonized lands were often portrayed as uncivilized savages who had to be defeated invariably with no humane cause or purpose. In certain parts of the world, the colonials refused to accept that the inhabitants were even humans! In the name of science and anthropology, horrible, heinous, and grotesque treatments were meted out to so-called "animals." A notable example discussed



in the book is Ota Benga, the pygmy who was displayed alongside the animals in the Bronx zoo.

The Classical Hollywood film *Air Force One* (Petersen, 1997) is a contemporary example of imperialistic cinema. The first scene of the film shows a group of American and Russian commandos performing a covert operation and kidnapping Kazakhstan General Ivan Radek. This operation of invading another country is reminiscent of the long standing intrusive philosophy of US international policy. Subsequently in the film, US President James Marshall (portrayed by Harrison Ford) proclaims an impromptu and self-prescribed US foreign policy of absolute intolerance to any terrorist act while addressing the people of Russia. The US president's bold speech and the act of invading another country for its political gain embody flavors of imperialism. Quoting *Air Force One*, this speech by Marshall illustrates the ideology of invasion:

As you know, three weeks ago American Special Forces, in cooperation with the Russian Republican Army, secured the arrest of Kazakhstan self-proclaimed dictator, General Ivan Radek, whose brutal sadistic reign had given new meaning to the word horror. I am proud to say our operation was a success....What we did here was important. We finally pulled our heads out of the sand, we finally stood up to the brutality and said "We've had enough."

The above speech is reminiscent of the real life situation of the war on Iraq. The imperialistic act of the invasion of a foreign country in the name of terrorism is portrayed in a manner which is normalized and uses the act of terror as an excuse to attack and invade while concealing the real foreign policy from the people of America and the world. The viewer is mesmerized in the visual effects and sympathy is drawn to the family of the President and the people on board *Air Force One*. This feeling is exaggerated by showing a child and mother on the plane who are in distress by an attack by the "monster" as quoted in the film. The previous invasion on behalf of the United States is not shown at all or referenced in the same sympathetic manner, making it an unequal and biased portrayal. The violence is justified and rather painted as war against terror in order to protect the country, making it more about fighting other soldiers than taking personal, local victims into account.

The airplane *Air Force One* acts as a symbol of the United States, and in general, a symbol of US supremacy and power—this power has tried to dominate internationally in various streams for several decades in real life and not just in politics. In *Air Force One*, when the plane is hijacked by Kazhak

terrorists, the US president stays on board the plane and single-handedly overcomes the terrorists, thereby preserving the image of worldwide US power. The airplane can be considered as a symbol of the country in which the US president, representing the leader of the nation as a whole, battles with nefarious foreign nationals.

The imperialist nature of such a film is seen in the portrayal of the villains, who are invariably cast as people with accents from other cultures and countries, and/or people of other ethnic races. Such people are shown as barbaric, cold-hearted, and without feelings, and do not hesitate to resort to violence to achieve their means. This villainous character stereotyping also forms the basis of classical Hollywood cinema produced for several years since the history of Hollywood cinema. The hijacking of the plane and the struggle to regain control over it conveys the message, "he who controls Air Force One controls the world." The vanquishing of the villains and reestablishment of control over Air Force One reinforces the message of American world superiority and power. In the film, the Russian president is shown as a powerless pawn that is completely controlled by the US president. He has no option but to comply with Marshall's request over the phone to release Radek from prison: once again, America has the power to control the leaders of other countries with a mere phone call – an imperialistic trait.

*Air Force One* also echoes Lukes' two-dimensional model of power, i.e., where an entity not only determines the final outcome of decision-making over a key issue, but also determines what that key issue is, for example by deciding or limiting the issues that are to be discussed (Lukes, 2005; Scott, 2001). In *Air Force One*, the status quo of American power and the US invasive policy is justified, normalized, and enforced. The film propounds ideals and values that conform to it, i.e., terrorism should not be tolerated, and rather than threaten the ideology of imperialism it is okay to invade other countries. It has a biased viewpoint, focusing on the act of terrorism rather than showing both sides of the picture, where, in the beginning, America was the first to make the offensive move. By using special effects, intense violence, and fast paced action, the audience is distracted and mesmerized, and is prevented from thinking about the core issue while sympathizing and supporting the imperialist ideals.

*Air Force One* as a Hollywood film is imperialist in more ways than one, primarily with its ideology of American power. A film such as this also represents the successful attempts of the Hollywood film industry as a blockbuster to monopolize and conquer the world film market with high budgets, visually packed effects, and the showcasing of the American president's technologically

superior plane. The Hollywood film industry uses its huge capital investment power to produce high quality films not in terms of content but in the craftsmanship of filmmaking that other countries struggle to compete with, even though there is very little substance or any healing message which could help people as a whole; yet the very same films tantalize and captivate audiences worldwide and fill the coffers of the Hollywood elites.

In the business of film, Hollywood in itself is imperialistic, and *Air Force One* is yet another example of Hollywood imperialism. According to Thompson and Bordwell (1994), the historical tracing of American cinema is compared to the European counterparts, where the economic and political struggle of national cinemas of other countries were hugely threatened with the advent of Hollywood films primarily due to the fact that Hollywood films were high-budget, mass-produced, and technologically superior, even though they lacked originality the way the European films did. The national cinema of other countries such as France, Germany, and Great Britain were largely replaced after the colonization by Hollywood cinema. There was a cultural imperialism by Hollywood into other countries by invading and overtaking their National cinemas. Quoting Thompson and Bordwell in this context,

The United Nations (founded in 1945), the Organization for European Economic Cooperation, and, in 1957, the European Economic Community (known as the Common Market) certainly constituted steps towards the goal of European unity. Yet the dream of a Europe without national boundaries was not realized. Nations insisted on their distinct cultural identities. Many Europeans argued that in the wake of American economic and political domination had come a cultural imperialism – that in advertising, fashion, and mass media, Europe was already becoming a colony of the United States. In the postwar era, then, we find a complex, often tense interplay among national identity, European unity, allegiance to America, and resistance to it.

In summary, the Hollywood film industry routinely produces films that capture an imperialist idea of the overall nation while paralleling the industry's own business ideology of being imperialistic.

### **Semiotics**

Semiosis is the process of interpreting and using signs. This theory was developed to introduce a universal methodology to study signs and sign systems that accounts for all signifying systems. Semiology was devised as a method for

applying the structural form of language across all signifying systems—for providing a model of language across all signifying systems. Hall (2004) discusses the idea of representational systems to decipher language in any form, i.e., visual, written, or auditory:

But how does language construct meanings?... Language is able to do this because it is a representational system. In language, we use signs and symbols—whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects—to stand for or to represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings. Language is one of the “media” through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture. Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meaning is produced. (emphasis in original)

Semiotics is not considered very scientific in its approach but it has become one of the most prevalent systems with regards to its practical use in cultural studies. With this form of semiotic methodology, we are able to study the inner and outer cultural representations and their meanings across the full range of signifying practices such as visual gestures, attire, written language, speech, photography, art, film, and so on. The main emphasis is given to the sign. The sign can be described as something having a physical form, which must refer to something other than itself. The concept of Semiotics is significant especially when it comes to making meaning out of pictures. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then semiotics is the language used to describe that picture. Barry (2002) discusses a signifying system and its relation to cultural meanings, stating that “A signifying system in this sense is a very wide concept: it means any organized and structured set of signs which carries cultural meanings.” Barry explains that culture is made up of many structural networks which carry a significance, which can operate in a systematic way: “These networks operate through ‘codes’ as a system of Science; they can make statements, just as language does, and they can be read or decoded by the structuralist or semiotician.” The visual study of a structure is a communicative process where the image represents and communicates something to the viewer—a meaning or an idea. The image also is a form of iconicity that can be interpreted with several complex series of signs.

The example analyzed below illustrates how semiotics can help us to understand deeper, hidden cultural meanings of this given picture. In this case, we examine the picture on the cover page of *Time* magazine (Perry, 2006)—a

traditional Indian woman clad in ethnic jewelry, makeup, and traditional folk dance costume while sporting a modern technological device, i.e., a hands-free phone headset. As Barry points out regarding a signifying system and how a set of signs carrying cultural meanings can be analyzed using semiotics, we will apply semiotics to understand the deeper cultural meanings of this picture and attempt to decode the producer's intended message.



The first glance at the cover of this issue of *Time* brings out a range of personal emotions as I am Indian myself, and also as a regular viewer removed from the clothes of my ethnicity. Viewing this image wearing the lens of my ethnicity, this image howls at the ridiculing and exaggeration of the Indian culture and tradition. The look on the woman's face is rather cocky, showing off her technological gadget as if that is a powerful part of her being as a folk dancer or a representation of an Indian woman. The look on her face in conjunction with the headpiece undermines the overall power of her own self as a traditional woman of the East; she needs the technology from the West to have a sense of power. The image also represents and attempts to stereotype the Indian woman (who is married to the Western culture) as predominantly very traditional, which is not true. India has over 22 states with over 22 different languages, with different racial origins (such as Indian people who look like

Asians, or certain Indian people who have extremely light or dark skin depending on which part of country they belong to) and cultures, costumes, and respective cuisines unique to their culture. Hence, this picture does not encapsulate every Indian woman, and it also does not show that most Indian women in the big cities are highly educated and have a more modern type of lifestyle borrowed from the West in terms of their clothes, fast-food, and a nuclear family structure tilting more towards individualism.

The picture also contains strong visual elements that stand out. First, it is seen that the headset competes with the woman's jewelry on a one-to-one basis, in the following sense. The telephone headpiece going around the woman's head rivals the jewelry on her head. Also, the earpiece actually covers and masks the jewelry over her ear. Further, the wires of the headpiece distract from the ethnicity of the necklace. Finally, the mouthpiece and the jewelry on the woman's nose also visually compete with each other. All of this makes for a very culturally tense photograph, and the picture gives the message of US outsourcing, capitalist colonization, and domination over another culture.

The second striking visual element in the picture is the halo behind the woman's head. This halo is transparent, and reveals Indian ethnic artwork below it, with the halo itself being more visually pronounced than the artwork. Since a halo around the head signifies enlightenment, this element can be interpreted as the existence of an underlying Indian cultural structure that is "enlightened" by US technology, as signified by the halo over the artwork. This is especially true since the radius of the halo does not extend over her entire head, but is dictated by the size of the headpiece.

The picture also tries to glorify the "positive" effect of Western commercial globalization on countries like India. Truth be told, a person wearing a headpiece as shown in the picture works as a member of customer support personnel at a call center. These workers usually do not earn a large income (actually, a mere fraction of the wage their US counterparts would earn), and have to work graveyard shifts to offer support to US-based customers during daytime hours in the United States. While it is true that the outsourcing of customer support to countries such as India has created more jobs for the local population, it is also true that the perceived benefits of US investment in India has benefitted the local people in less ways than projected by the picture. For example, given the average wage earned by the workers at call centers, it would be impossible for such a person to even remotely afford the kind of expensive jewelry and clothing shown on the woman in the picture.

Further, as discussed above, the average population living in the cities has imbibed a Western lifestyle including comfortable casual Indian or Western clothing, as opposed to the stiff, beautiful, grandiose traditional outfits as the one depicted in the picture above. This picture is thus a grossly inaccurate representation of Indian society. Also, almost all of the call centers are centered in big cities and working women do not wear traditional costumes and jewelry to work, as portrayed in this picture; instead they sport more casual Indian clothing without the heavy jewelry, or even wear Western outfits such as pants and tops. In this sense, this culturally insensitive picture is a mockery of Indian culture and paints an irrelevant and false image of the Indian culture and economy. The coded message which is represented by all these different complex signs presented by the producer of this image attempts to stereotype and to demean another culture in an insensitive way without painting all shades of truth. The image also serves not just to ridicule but also to debase traditional art and culture by mixing in the technological device. This iconicity portrays a certain cultural meaning which would be perceived differently by the Western viewers and very differently by a person belonging to the culture which it represents.

### **Conclusion**

From the analysis presented in this paper, it is seen that media content is very rich both in depth and meaning. More often than not, such content can have multiple readings, which are purposefully encoded into the content by the producer of that content. For the scholar of mass communication research, the theories of mass communication form invaluable analytical tools in decoding and deciphering media content. A range of interpretation can be derived using semiotics to understand the visual and linguistic structure of a story and its cultural meanings, which also extends beyond structure by analyzing how the content has use for the media consumer, be it superficially or to form a certain ideology. Based on the analysis, the presence of the motifs of both star power as well as cultural imperialism is observed. From the discussion of the culture industry as well as the uses and gratifications theory, we see the use of star power in both cases (in *Batman Begins* as well as *The Oprah Winfrey show*). Also, while *Air Force One* is an example of cultural imperialism through the medium of film, the depiction of the Indian woman on the cover of *Time* magazine portrays cultural imperialism in print media, through technology.

The overtly or covertly glazed messages have a profound effect on us as people and the society we form, hence the extrapolation of these messages is

significant in an age where we are being distracted and engaged with a bombardment of auditory and visual stimulation which barely address key issues of our society. Further, the understanding of our society with a world view perspective takes us beyond the realms of local, sensationalized, celebrity-driven news or star power commoditization—it points to more important and challenging questions which are avoided, such as invading another nation without introspection regarding the economic or ecological costs, the traumatic consequences, or the selfish orientation towards consumerism which imperialistically and blindly affects cultures of the world, making them endangered like some plant and animal species themselves.

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