DIALOGUE
The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy

Grounded Aesthetics: Pedagogy for a Post-Truth Era

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of cultural studies, positivism and formalism fell out of favor. But in recent years, altered versions of these methodologies have been suggested as solutions to the deficiencies of the ideological approach dominating the field. Where the ideological approach looks at the content of texts to determine their meaning, the aesthetic approach adopted by media scholars in recent years returns to the close textual readings of formalism (while abandoning its assertion that meaning resides in the text alone). Similarly, where the ideological approach tends to use textual analysis devoid of sociological empiricism, the use of "big data" in the humanities enhances interpretation by using empirical data alongside it (while rejecting positivism's assumption that measurable data alone is probative). This article draws both methodological strands together to propose an approach to media interpretation called "grounded aesthetics." Grounded aesthetics involves correlating sociological data with close textual reading to argue for the likely social meaning of the text, given the techniques it uses and the social reality around it. Examples of classroom activities are used to show how the approach can address the "post-truth" perspective many students share: that analyses of representation are interchangeable opinions. Grounded aesthetics greatly improves students' ability to create well-supported textual analyses and to evaluate the persuasiveness of others' arguments. It also models critical thinking skills that are useful for dismantling attacks on reality in the "fake news" era, especially those that dismiss analyses of inequality as ideology.

Keywords*:* aesthetics, big data, class, cultural studies, empiricism, formalism, gender, inequality, media studies, pedagogy, post-truth, race

INTRODUCTION

Cultural studies scholars in the U.S. receive substantial training in the cultural function of ideology, but may be less well equipped to use other methodological approaches in their teaching. With the cultural turn, positivism and formalism fell out of favor, but in recent years they've been reconsidered in their newest iterations: aesthetics and big data. Many students bring a "post-truth" perspective into the media studies classroom – one in which analyses of representation are dismissed as mere opinion. Aesthetic and empirical analysis can be combined to address this perspective head-on, to improve students' ability to create detailed, persuasive analyses of media texts. The same habits of critical thought can also equip students to respond to the "post-truth" era[1] that surrounds them, in which analyses of inequality are dismissed as ideology. Drawing on my experience teaching media studies courses, this article argues that "grounded aesthetics," a pedagogical approach that combines aesthetics with empirical studies, can create more persuasive and accurate analyses of how ideology works than the ideological approach alone.

The examples that follow demonstrate how students can be taught to make persuasive arguments about the connections between inequality in everyday life and media representation by preparing them with foundational empirical knowledge and then training them how to closely analyze texts for social meaning. I designed this approach to address the most common challenges to critical thinking I see in my television studies classes: an inability to distinguish facts from opinions, excessive relativism, discomfort with discussing inequality, a cognitive orientation toward concrete information and susceptibility to cultural influences that exaggerate individual autonomy while minimizing social influence and collective experience. In addition to developing students' media analysis skills, my approach models techniques for understanding ideology in the news, in social media, and in everyday life as well. It argues for a humanistic mode of interpretation that is grounded in textual and empirical evidence, which provides students with tools for principled engagement with the ideological and factual distortions of our current "post-truth" era.

The "aesthetics" in grounded aesthetics refers to the study of form. Cardwell describes this as "thoughtful, reflective and respectful consideration of texts' stylistic qualities" (23). While literary scholars have long employed close readings of texts, in my own field of television studies much, if not most, older scholarship largely focused on the ideology implicit in the narrative (23), failing to attend to the visual, performative, and sonic qualities of the text. This may be due to the fact that when television studies was established as a field, many scholars using its humanities-oriented approach were trained in literary studies rather than visual media (Allen 11; Brunsdon 107-8). The return to aesthetics might therefore be explained by the field's maturation, as a new generation of scholars has rejected television's abject status relative to film (Hilmes 112), giving it the same close attention as any other art form. While aesthetics can be approached in limitless ways, some common concepts used to analyze aesthetics are: gaze (the way the camera moves to convey information or encourage identification with characters), narrative structure (the way the storyline is organized), implied author (the places in the text where we see its perspective), *mise en scene* (the elements that make up the look and mood of a text), genre (a group of thematically and stylistically similar texts that share conventions), performance (the manner in which the content of the text is executed by performers), and quality (which is evaluated in aesthetic or sociological terms).[2]

The "grounded" in grounded aesthetics refers to a variety of forms of empiricism used to generate broad generalizations about patterns in texts, or to establish baseline knowledge about everyday life that can be used to evaluate how textual choices generate a particular representation of reality. The most recent version of this in the humanities is big data, the study of trends across large data sets. In terms of the analytical opportunities digitization has provided for humanistic fields, this can involve coding, standardizing, and tracking macro-

1 In late 2016, Oxford Dictionaries identified "post-truth" as The Word of the Year, after the disregard for factual reality displayed in the U.K. Brexit and U.S. presidential campaigns (Wang 2016).

2 See Cragin 2015 for a detailed explanation of these concepts and how they can be applied in the classroom.

level patterns in qualitative information, such as the Cinemetrics website,[3] which uses computer-generated analysis to quantify the length of edited segments of visual media. It can also include the use of large data sets of information, many of which are digitally accessible, via online publications from think tanks and government agencies. For the purposes of this article, I am using the term generally, to denote any empirical studies of large social structures that can be used to enhance textual interpretation.

PEDAGOGY IN A "POST-TRUTH" ERA

These two methodological trends of aesthetics and big data are increasingly present in cultural studies scholarship, and there are a variety of reasons why they can be helpful in our teaching as well. In the U.S., the majority of cultural studies scholars come from the humanities, a field that is frequently scrutinized for bias by politicians who see little value in humanistic inquiry. Some of the most common criticisms of cultural studies are that it is ideological rather than objective, and that it involves indoctrination rather than education (Bérubé 2007). While there is a small grain of truth in these concerns, in that the humanities model does emphasize qualitative concerns and interpretive methods rather than discovering facts, the criticisms reflect a widespread conflation of ideological analysis with ideology *itself*. As Schiappa notes, because students are often resistant to ideological analysis and tend to perceive it as reading into things, or robbing the viewing experience of its fun, "To overcome such resistance we not only have to make criticism pleasurable, we have to make our own critical interventions persuasive" (169).

Therefore, precise demonstration of *how* ideology operates in texts or across social strata serves as a persuasive defense against the assumption that we are "reading into things" too deeply, or presenting mere opinions, rather than informed interpretations grounded in textual and factual evidence. This may simply be more pedagogically effective, as well, since most students begin college with an orientation toward concrete thinking and need substantial help understanding abstract concepts (McConnell et al 462). After abandoning the belief there is one correct interpretation of the events and experiences around them, students often progress to the belief everything's relative – that there's no way to adjudicate between alternate accounts. This developmental phase is also culturally reinforced in our current moment, when our ability to judge facticity is challenged, at the same time that the legitimacy of traditional arbiters of fact such as news institutions have come under question (from President Donald Trump's frequent misuse of the term "fake news," to actual fake news created by the circulation of doctored images, to potential Russian disinformation campaigns, to recent scandals involving journalists' falsification of news stories). In an environment where the inability to distinguish interpretation from fact allows for the wholesale dismissal of reality when it is ideologically inconvenient, it is important that we continually reinforce the distinction between the two, and improve students' ability to form factually-supported arguments and disarm unsupported ones.

In other words, there is a dual benefit to the cross-over methodologies of grounded aesthetics, in that this approach benefits students both as students and as citizens. For critical cultural studies scholars and teachers, the purpose of media studies is not merely appreciation of the popular arts per se, but rather understanding their connection to everyday life, and most especially its inequalities. Open discussion about our textual and sociological methods, the usefulness and limits of each, and how we arrive at our conclusions about the ideological meaning of popular texts all have the potential to make our students better scholars, and can also equip them with tools they need to navigate other areas of life where they constantly encounter debates about ideology and facts. In terms of media studies, there are many connections between the "post" discourses of our culture – the belief that we are living in a post-racial or post-feminist society – and recent changes in the complexity of television programming and technology, as in the attitude that, "Because we can choose from so many different options, because our experiences of television are now so varied and so

3 http://www.cinemetrics.lv

self-directed, it is old-fashioned and irrelevant to ask questions about television's place in the workings of power" (Levine 180). By establishing a baseline of facts about the reality of inequality, and then exploring how these facts are represented in media through an immersion in the formal elements of texts, we can train students to form their own conclusions about what is most important – not any possible meaning a text might have, but its likely social meaning. To do this, students first need an understanding of the empirical and ideological realities surrounding the text, in order to understand the interpretive context different audiences bring to its interpretation. The approach demonstrated in the examples that follow illustrates how beginning at the concrete and guiding students toward discussions of hegemonic beliefs encourages recognition of, and a richer understanding of, the ideology at play in cultural texts.

I first began to rethink my primarily ideological approach when teaching a course on television comedy. I had designed the course around themes of cultural inequality, as I had been trained to do, and as we studied each program, we looked at it from a generalized perspective, in terms of its cultural messages about each social group represented. The students seemed unenthused with this approach, and were resistant to my conclusions, often pushing back against the idea that comedy could be read with any seriousness at all. They came alive, however, when we began talking about the texts as example of artistic performance. When studying *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), instead of moving directly to a conversation about the gender norms of the period, I realized I should first begin with an appreciation of Ball's tremendous physical skills as a performer. In "Lucy Thinks Ricky is Trying to Murder Her" (1951), Lucy stuffs a garbage can lid and a cast-iron skillet underneath her bathrobe for protection, and bobs and weaves around the kitchen like a prize-fighter every time her husband approaches her. We observed not only the remarkable precision and energy of her movements, but also the humor generated by her violation of gender norms. From here, the class took off, and it was easy to then segue into a consideration of the gender politics of the time, to contrast the relative non-conformity of Lucy's physical performance with the conservative message in the show's narrative, as argued in a seminal analysis of the show (Mellencamp 1986).

I realized my training as a scholar not only led to me to do a disservice to the texts I was analyzing (in that my analyses of their cultural meaning looked at content and narrative structure alone, rather than providing detailed evidence for how these interacted with performance and visual and auditory styles), but to do a disservice to my students as well, by telling them my conclusions without showing them how I arrived at them. From that point forward, I designed all my classes with one goal in mind: for students to be able to create their own well-supported interpretations of the likely social meaning of media texts, by considering both their formal elements and the cultural influences surrounding them. Just as I realized I needed to demonstrate the intermediate steps involved in textual analysis, I thought through the intermediate steps one would need to understand how ideology in everyday life shapes the interpretation of media. So in addition to incorporating more aesthetics into class activities, when designing The Female Detective, a course on race, gender, and crime, I decided to also experiment with incorporating much more sociological data about inequality in everyday life, to see if this lowered students' resistance to the idea that ideology was operating in these entertainment texts. The examples that follow are based on techniques I have refined over the last ten years teaching the course.

The combination of aesthetics and empirical data can be used in a variety of ways to explore the connection between everyday life and its representation. My first few examples below, on gender inequality in Nancy Drew mysteries and *Cagney & Lacey*, demonstrate one angle of approach: using a close grounding in the aesthetics of the text to better understand ideology in everyday life. The subsequent example, of racial inequality in *The Wire*, approaches the issue from the opposite direction, grounding our understanding of the ideology of race in broad patterns of empirical data, in order to understand the representation of race in the text. Each approach emphasizes one side of the representation-reality connection more than the other,

but both use the same pedagogical strategy to study it: moving from the concrete to analytical, in order to gradually build students' ability to distinguish between ideology, representation, and fact.

NANCY DREW: THE DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

This section demonstrates how starting from concrete examples of representation helps students tease out their inherent ideological implications. One of the central premises of the course is that the figure of the female detective is at odds with traditional gender norms, due to her physical or mental strength, bravery, and independence. We trace the development of this figure through a variety of genres and media, from late 19th/ early 20th-century literature up through contemporary TV and film. In each era, we look at the gender anxiety the female detective creates (through contemporaneous responses to the text), and how the author alters the traditional detective model to accommodate a feminine hero. In this manner, we work back and forth between micro-level analyses of specific examples and a broader scope illustrating larger patterns, to gradually build an argument for the cultural implications of these representations.

Across the decades, a clear pattern emerges. Until recently, the female detective's power has usually been diminished through a combination of the following strategies: emphasizing her appearance over her abilities; emphasizing her humility and acceptance of a secondary status to men; framing her abilities as irrational, accidental, or attributable to male mentors; or emphasizing her physical or emotional incompetence. Students often have difficulty seeing how highlighting the detective's femininity could be a means of disempowering her, given that post-feminist media tropes encourage viewers to see traditional femininity as an innate form of personal expression that generates power (Gill). I've found, perhaps counterintuitively, that closely describing the aesthetics of a text can be an effective way to begin discussion of more abstract concepts such as their ideology – for example, by looking at a book's cover. Concrete description get the class warmed up and ready for more abstract thinking, but also allows *the students* to generate the evidence for the ideological analysis that follows, rather than imposing a conclusion developed by the teacher.

In preparation for our discussion of Nancy Drew, students read *The Secret of the Old Clock,* and secondary sources on gender norms in the first half of the 20th century (both in everyday life and in popular culture). I begin with a display of the covers of Nancy Drew mysteries from different eras, which provides the opportunity to think about the gender norms reflected in each period. The Nancy Drew series has been reissued every few decades from the 1920s to the present, which provides a helpful point of comparison, particularly when multiple versions of the same volume in the series are compared. While the clothing and hairstyles vary with each reissue, there are commonalities that can be traced across the series in how femininity is depicted, especially in the reissues published prior to the last few decades.

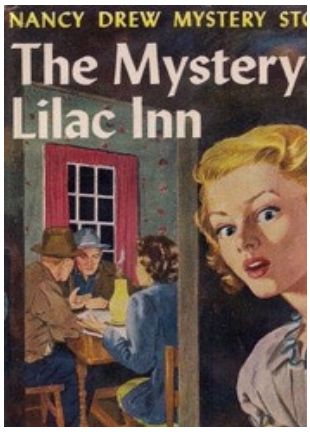

Image 1: The cover of the 1950 edition of *The Mystery at Lilac Inn* frames Nancy Drew as a decorative rather than an active figure.

As the cover of the 1950 edition of *The Mystery at Lilac Inn* illustrates (see Image 1), Nancy Drew is often represented in a variety of adventurous scenarios that would have been perceived as daring in the early 20th century, yet visually, the covers often emphasize the decorative role and physical and emotional restraint traditional femininity requires, rather than Nancy's competence and physical and emotional strength. The students identify many specific details about the cover that reflect this trend, and then on their own, or with some assistance, are able to draw conclusions about the meaning these appear to convey. For example, they notice the polish of Nancy's makeup and hair, the stylized ruffles of her blouse, and her positioning toward the viewer (*conclusion: the image emphasizes her decorative function over her active role*). They notice her off-balance posture and the crook of her fingers, how this is unlike the posture one would expect of someone sneakily detecting – balanced, elbows and knees bent, hands open, facing toward danger (*conclusion: the image implies she's not prepared to react quickly or with strength*). They notice how high Nancy's eyebrows are raised, her widened eyes, and her open mouth, all conveying a sense of surprise (*conclusion: the image implies that she stumbled onto the solution accidentally, rather than through logic*). We consider the racial implications of this vision of femininity, not only in how often Nancy's whiteness and blondeness are visually emphasized against dark backgrounds, but also in how often they are emphasized narratively, in Nancy's interactions with people of color. Using a secondary source, we discuss the way the racism of earlier versions of the books was addressed in later reissues by removing all references to people of color, and how film adaptations emphasized Nancy's youth and femininity even more strongly than the books (Nash 77). We end discussion of the series with a clip from *Nancy Drew: Detective* (1938), where the protagonist is transformed into an incompetent sidekick to her boyfriend, who now replaces her as the star of the narrative.

CAGNEY & LACEY: THE BIG PICTURE

For the section of the course looking at the influential series *Cagney & Lacey* (1982-1988), one of the learning outcomes is for students to understand how reception is influenced by historical context and contemporaneous "representational ecology" (Schiappa 23), and it is therefore important to consider how an image operates *relative to others*, rather than debating whether it is, in the abstract, a positive or negative representation. Our assigned reading addresses the 1970s and 1980s response to second wave feminism in everyday life – when gender roles were being debated and women joined the police force in greater numbers – and on television, where the female detective also became more common (Mizejewski 59). The activity below serves as another example of how attention to aesthetic detail illuminates how texts operate ideologically, but this time an additional layer of interpretation is added, as students learn to evaluate representation as a potential cultural response to a particular historical moment. The aesthetic approach used with Nancy Drew books also works well for television, because opening sequences and pilot episodes act as a kind of book cover, often reflecting the essence of a series, providing a snapshot of both the overall premise and the mood producers hope to effect. Through head-to-head comparisons of short parallel clips from shows with female vs. male leads, and of female leads from one era vs. those of another, we again explore the ways the "neutral" (i.e., male) model of a detective is altered when a woman takes his place.

Image 2: *Get Christine Love!* emphasizes the main character's competence and confidence.

Image 3: In *Police Woman,* femininity is linked with incompetence and victimization.

We compare the opening sequences and several clips from two series that premiered in 1974: *Get Christie Love!* (1974-1975), a blaxploitation series with an African-American woman as its protagonist (see Image 2), and *Police Woman* (1974-1978), a police procedural with a white female lead (see Image 3). After watching these, the students free-write about concrete details they observe or adjectives that come to mind as they watch. Inevitably, "strong" is the main adjective used for Christie, and "weak" for Pepper. While both are conventionally attractive, Christie has many traits culturally coded as masculine, such as physical and verbal aggression that she directs at men and women alike. The opening sequence conveys her confidence, intelligence, and competence: she is shown running, jumping over railings, and driving aggressively; the camera focuses on her face or on her whole person; she is shown acting alone, with the exception of brief images of her male co-workers in the last 10 seconds of the sequence. By contrast, Pepper's appearance is the primary trait emphasized in the opening: the camera focuses closely on her legs or breasts (when she is dressed skimpily for undercover operations), or it slowly pans down her body, voyeuristically; when she is shown, she is largely shown as a victim, standing helpless in horror as she is attacked by various men; and she is only shown in the first third of the sequence, in these decorative or victimized ways, whereas the last two thirds of the sequence are shots of her male colleagues actively and competently pursuing police work without her. The students always note how fun Christie is to watch, and how dull Pepper is, yet *Get Christie Love!* only lasted one season, while *Police Woman* went on for four. Our reading suggests a possible explanation for this discrepancy, in that the Blaxploitation style was addressed to an African-American audience, "but the formula didn't work for the white-dominated Nielson audiences" (Mizejewski 63-64).

Image 4: *Charlie's Angels* combines decorative glamour and competent teamwork to deliver an ambivalent message about women's strength.

Compared to Pepper's glaring incompetence (in the episode we watch, she keeps dropping her gun and sobbing uncontrollably), *Charlie's Angels* (1976-1981) represents an improvement, as the Angels are all skilled, brave, and effective (see Image 4). We learn the show was extremely popular with women viewers possibly because of their glamour, but also because of their independence from male authority and their teamwork as well, in that the series represented the first application of the "buddy" formula to women (Mizejewski 69). Yet a comparison of the show's opening sequence to *The Rookies* (1972-1976) from the same period reveals its use of color, music, setting, and camera work all highlight the decorative and sexualized function of the protagonists' femininity. The men in *The Rookies* are framed in realistic poses and actions that emphasize their courage and competence, with intense, threatening music enhancing the sense of their abilities as crime-fighters, as they charge aggressively across the screen. Images of the former police officers of *Charlie's Angels*, in contrast, are initially realistic, yet grow increasingly glamorized and unrelated to police duties as the sequence progresses: in tandem with music that conveys a sense of ease or entertainment, the women are shown tossing their hair, eyes wide and mouths open, as if to convey they are devoid of thought.

We consider our primary text, *Cagney & Lacey* (1982-1988), against this backdrop of prior images. In addition to watching a season 2 episode on date rape, which fits thematically with our exploration of gender and violence, we take a side-by-side look at the opening sequences of seasons 1 and 2 to see how the series struggled to find its place culturally in representing strong female detectives, in an era in which women's physical strength and bravery may have seemed threatening to many in the audience (see Images 5 and 6). After reading how the show's producers were concerned that Cagney and Lacey were too aggressive and might be read as lesbian (D'Acci 30-37), we compare the changes in each season's opening sequence, finding ample evidence of this anxiety. The students are able to easily identify aesthetic changes that replace masculine-coded music, costumes, facial expressions, and actions with feminine-coded ones. For example, the first season's opening sequence is reminiscent of *The Rookies*, with its serious music and many shots of uniformed (female) officers bravely charging into danger. It seems the producers originally wanted to signify that this was no *Charlie's Angels*. The second opening sequence is profoundly different, however: the brass-buttoned navy blue uniforms of season one have been replaced by colorful scarves and soft office casual, as the women laugh together, shop together, and repeatedly smile at their male partners and co-workers, while peppy, upbeat theme song plays. The students conclude that the sequence is meant to convey that these women will not threaten the patriarchal order.

Image 5: *Cagney & Lacey,* Season 1: the opening sequence conveys the detectives' bravery in the face of danger

Image 6: *Cagney & Lacey,* Season 2: the opening sequence emphasizes the detectives' friendship

These exercises provide demonstrable evidence of the key premise of the course, that strength and competence are on some level culturally understood to be incompatible with femininity. We may not have

reached this level of understanding had I started with a simple assertion about gender ideology, but the point is more easily granted when we try to imagine Sherlock Holmes positioned as Nancy Drew was on the book cover, or a male police officer constantly smiling while shopping, arm and arm with his pal. These aesthetic analyses powerfully illustrate discomfort with images of strong women, and they also help students understand something I have had difficulty convincing them of in the past, that the sexualization of women can potentially be damaging to gender equality. While I would argue that sexualization per se is not inherently harmful, it is the primary way women are represented in media, and the students usually conclude that because it conveys incompetence and predominates over alternative ways of viewing women, it is troubling to them. At the same time, while *Cagney & Lacey* makes some accommodation to gender anxiety, our analysis of the foregrounded feminist perspective in the full episode leaves students with an appreciation of *how much better* these characters are than those in prior shows: they have fully developed interiors, are flawed yet likeable, intelligent, brave, and thoroughly competent at their jobs. The students' exposure to a variety of older series helps them assess representations sympathetically, as compromises with the cultural limitations of their eras, and lays a foundation for later sections of the course that look at the wave of female detectives that followed in the wake of the critical and popular success of *Cagney & Lacey*.

THE SYSTEM: EMOTIONS AND FACTS IN LESSONS ON RACISM AND POVERTY

The following section approaches the representation-reality (or aesthetic-empirical) divide from the reverse direction, studying the intersection of racial and economic inequality to form a foundation of prior knowledge allowing students to assess the representation of inequality and crime in *The Wire*. The preparatory work described below is completed both outside of and during several class periods, so we are subsequently able to develop an aesthetic analysis sensitive to the series' use of formal techniques to build a macro-level, structural analysis of crime, race, and poverty. Given that my students' comments during discussions of inequality often reflect strong belief in individualism and even "post-racialism," exposing them to the clear patterns of inequality emerging in large data sets and other forms of empirical research helps them see that structural explanations of inequality are not mere liberal platitudes but rather fact-based conclusions with substantial explanatory power.

The student population at my university is primarily white and from rural environments, where they seem to have had little prior experience interacting with people of color. My courses always focus intensively on race and gender in popular media, which means they tend to draw a challenging demographic: usually a third of the students are ethnic studies and women's studies majors who care deeply about race- and gender-based inequality, and the remainder are students who do not seem to share this interest, but would like to take a fun course on TV. Given this dynamic, what often happened in the past was that white students would not feel comfortable talking about race in front of students of color, and the tension in the room meant issues were discussed in a perfunctory, polite way that did not seem to connect meaningfully with students' feelings and beliefs. While there are many important aspects of pedagogy to consider when discussing racism in the classroom, such as how to effectively and supportively engage students of color, the activities that follow address the primary challenge I see in my classes (given their demographics): white students' reluctance to fully engage with discussions of race. If the goal is to reduce racism, then finding a way to reach shut-down white students is critically important. While people of color are the ones primarily harmed by racism, consideration of white students' perspectives on racism also needs to be included, in order for them to set aside their defensiveness and genuinely invest in the conversation (Ellwanger 38-39; Giroux 383-384).

Recognizing this challenge, one many instructors share, I made several important changes to my teaching methods that have greatly improved the quality of discussions about racism. The first is that I

realized I needed to consider more deeply the emotional experience of discussing the subject. We now talk directly about the awkwardness of these kinds of conversations, that many people fear being judged, and that those who have been personally and painfully affected by inequality may feel their anger is not accepted or understood. I also branched out from my training in film studies to look at social science resources that could help students understand the structural, institutional, and historical causes of inequality, rather than reducing racism to the scope of individual prejudice. This helps redirect students away from preoccupation with whether they are individually responsible for racism toward understanding where racism came from, why it is still here, and how it harms people of color. Here are two sets of examples: 1) how I use psychological research and psychology-related exercises in the classroom to help shift students toward a structuralist perspective that reduces their defensiveness; and 2) how I use big data to demonstrate to students why a structuralist perspective on inequality is valid. For both types of activities, I have students access links to the shorter or more fact-based resources before class and then discuss their implications during class, and for the longer or more experiential activities, we do these wholly in class.

The Psychology of Racism

Doll tests are a series of long-running experiments that demonstrate how most children in the U.S. develop a belief in white superiority from a very young age. Originally conducted in the 1940s by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark, the test asks children to choose between dolls with lighter and darker skin tones, pointing to the one that is pretty, smart, or the one they would choose as a friend. These experiments have been replicated for decades, and while the exclusive association of whiteness with positive traits and blackness with negative ones has been slowly declining over the years, especially among children of color, the pattern is still predominant among white children. Videos of the results are widely available on YouTube,[4] and it's heartbreaking to see most of the children repeatedly choose the white doll. It seems to reduce many students' sense of personal guilt for collective racism, to see that children who are very young have already absorbed this message about race and value. Students are less likely to feel the need to defend themselves from the accusation of being racist when we acknowledge that many of us are carrying around subconscious racist beliefs transmitted to us in early childhood. The videos illustrate the implicit, ambient nature of this type of racism, which is much more common than the overt acts of hate that students are more readily able to accept as racist.

A Class Divided: A similar example I link to is a Frontline documentary (available on the PBS website[5]) about the blue eyes/brown eyes experiment teacher Jane Elliott conducted after MLK's assassination, where she marked elementary students with a collar denoting their eye color, then easily led one half of the class to mistreating the other, on the belief that they were superior to those with a different eye color. While these were young children, Elliott has repeated the experiment over the years with adults with similar results, which suggests that racial bias has a significant affective or psychological component that maturity and education do not necessarily address.

Project Implicit: Showing students examples of implicit bias is more effective than simply asserting that racism exists, given that the culture surrounding my classroom often claims it does not. In addition to several anecdotes that illustrate the concept of implicit bias, I include a link to the Project Implicit website[6] for students to view outside of class. It explains what implicit bias is and provides a wide variety of examples of different forms of it. The project includes online experiments available to the public that track how quickly participants click on a keyboard to associate marginalized and dominant groups with positive or negative traits, which may be an indicator of bias. While the project's principal investigators acknowledge that the results do not

4 For example, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZryE2bqwdk.

5 https://www.pbs.org/video/frontline-class-divided

6 https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit

predict which individuals will commit biased acts, they do claim that the results generate broad patterns that are predictive of how groups will behave, and that the results of the tests over the years reflect established trends of pro-white and anti-black bias in all racial groups, even among blacks themselves, suggesting just how widespread and unconscious implicit bias truly is (Tierney 2008).

Self-fulfilling Stereotypes: Mark Snyder's classic work on stereotypes as self-fulfilling prophecies make the link between unconscious bias and behavior, helping students see how prejudice persists. In a summary of the consistent results of decades' worth of psychology experiments, he analyzes how people enact and replicate prejudice: by acting in ways that make it more likely for us to have the kind of experience we anticipate in an exchange with someone from a different social group, or by remembering evidence that confirms stereotypes but forgetting evidence that does not.

Balance Your Budget: While there are many good tools available for thinking through issues of privilege and inequality at the individual level, such the widely reprinted "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (McIntosh), I also find it helpful to supplement these kinds of resources with data and activities supporting broader claims that: 1) explain how representative individual instances of inequality may be; and that 2) explain how structural forces can affect individual experience. For example, I find that my students, despite their predominantly lower-income backgrounds, still often make comments reflecting the belief that poverty is caused by a character flaws: the lack of willingness to work. So I created a budget activity, where students try to balance a month's worth of income and expenses using one of two spreadsheets I provide: a median-income budget for a U.S. family of four or a poverty-level budget. The students are allowed to choose which budget to balance, and invariably the majority of them choose a median income. I provide a list of estimates for costs they might not be aware of, such as diapers, formula, health insurance, groceries, etc., as well as summaries of current Census Bureau data (median and poverty-level incomes, statistics on the substantial percentage of the poor who work, etc.), which I link to.

The students work on their budgets outside of class, then discuss them during class. It is a very dynamic activity, as the students become intensely engaged in debating what they are and are not willing to sacrifice to make their budgets balance. Once they have got their budget balanced (which they almost always do by dropping their health insurance), I throw a wrench in their plans, and announce they have just had an unexpected baby, or the car needs expensive repairs, so now they cannot get to work, and then I ask what else they will sacrifice in response to this unexpected event. The biggest expenditures in their budgets align with national averages (where housing, health care, and child care are the biggest economic hurdles most families face), and they also begin to see how a single unexpected event can wreak havoc on their plans. The students find it extremely difficult to balance a median-income budget with all their needs (let alone their wants), but then they are shocked when I suggest they now cut their income in half and try balancing a poverty-level budget. Because the activity is focused around concrete details, they are eventually able to see how the minimum wage keeps people in poverty, even when working full-time.

Imagine You're a Slave: White students also frequently express the belief that racism no longer exists, because slavery ended long ago, or that unequal outcomes today are unrelated to historical inequality. I sometimes assign a free-writing activity on slavery, where students are asked to imagine that they were recently freed from life-long enslavement, in which they were removed from their family and country and taken to a foreign land where they were banned from owning money or learning to read and write. I ask them to imagine how they and their children would be emotionally, physically, and economically affected immediately after emancipation, and then given these effects, how the family would be impacted again a generation later, and then again later. Paired with data on disparities in wealth accumulation, the activity illustrates how these long-ago events could impact subsequent generations.

These resources have been invaluable because they document common patterns of responses to

inequality and then help students begin to understand how those might impact people on an individual level. The patterns they reveal are so widespread and persistent that students are eventually persuaded that, despite individual variation, large-scale racism does still exist. The activities also help remove a sense of personal responsibility for the current state of affairs, which allows white students to set aside their fear of being judged, so they can be more open to learning about racism. Once this emotional barrier to learning is reduced, we prepare for our discussion of *The Wire* by drawing on macro-level data to help explain how these patterns of prejudiced belief have translated into detrimental experiences shared by many people of color.

The Facts of Racism

I supplement these speculative activities focused on individual experience with information on racial discrimination trends in housing, lending, and hiring in various historical periods. Fortunately, large data sets of this kind of information are now regularly published by government agencies and other sources, and I have found myself spending more class time in recent years explicitly talking to my students about how to find reliable information online. In a "post-truth" era, these kinds of media literacy skills are even more critical. While the Trump administration has stripped the White House website[7] of much of its prior content, the National Archives has retained this information,[8] and many government entities still maintain independent websites, such as the Census Bureau[9] and the Bureau of Justice.[10] These sites often include downloadable spreadsheets and summary reports, which allow you to easily tailor assignments – you can provide students with summaries, or ask them to dive into the details and determine the pattern on their own. I also encourage students to read the work of reputable think tanks, those that may have a bias in terms of research focus, but use reliable research methods and neutral language, such as The Urban Institute[11] and The Williams Institute,[12] and I often provide links to coverage of a single issue by a variety of news outlets, so students can compare how they identify and describe social problems. For example, for our discussion of the War on Drugs (a key theme of the first season of *The Wire*), I include the following links to demonstrate that there's a broad consensus across the political spectrum that this strategy has been a failure:

- *The Atlantic (leans left)13*
- *The Cato Institute (leans right)14*
- *MSNBC (leans left)15*
- *National Review (leans right)16*
- *Time (relatively neutral)17*
- *The Washington Post (relatively neutral)18*

Using big data provides clear evidence that prejudicial discrepancies in outcomes still exist. It also helps isolate independent factors, as part of students' resistance to the idea of white privilege may be that race is intersectional with other aspects of their identities and experiences that are not hegemonic, such as the

7 https://www.whitehouse.gov

8 https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov

9 https://www.census.gov

10 https://www.bjs.gov

11 https://www.urban.org

12 https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu

13 https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/sessions-sentencing-memo/526029

14 https://www.cato.org/blog/sessions-re-escalates-drug-war

15 https://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/jeff-sessions-moves-forward-his-regressive-drug-war

16 https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/05/jeff-sessions-war-drugs-congress-should-change-law

17 https://time.com/4825099/don-winslow-trump-drug-policy

18 https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-new-war-on-drugs-wont-be-any-more-effective-than-the-old-one/2017/06/22/669260ee-56c3-11e7-a204-ad706461fa4f_story.html

economic disadvantage many of them experience. As Zingsheim and Goltz note,

> In order to place whiteness both in relationship to discourses of power and still remain grounded in lived experienxce, these students invoke topics other than race, such as class, in order to make sense of the theories. It is dangerous to allow these connections to displace race as the object of critical interrogation. It is equally dangerous to simply dismiss these intersections as refusals to engage in a critical discussion of race. (233)

Relying on large data sets can help address this difficulty in teasing out what is due to race, by ruling out other variables. The majority of poor people in the U.S. are white, so poverty is not only due to race. On the other hand, a quick look at Census data reveals that the rate of poverty for people of color in the U.S. is double the rate for whites (Pew Research Center 23). Over the span of hundreds of millions of people, this large, clear pattern would not have emerged from all the outcomes random probability could generate, if racism were not still at play.

The intersections of racial and economic inequality have a significant impact on crime as well. The disparities in rates of poverty described above suggest that, even though the majority of the poor are white, as a group their experience of poverty is fundamentally different than it is for African-Americans (the poor population represented in *The Wire*). By carefully disentangling the data on poverty and crime, Samson and Bean were able to define an "ecological dissimilarity" among poor whites and blacks: while 9 out of 10 poor whites live in stable, mixed-class neighborhoods where the disadvantages of poverty are mitigated, half of all poor blacks live in dysfunctional, extreme poverty neighborhoods that are highly violent, isolated from access to jobs and transportation, and where most residents are unemployed (11). Residing in an extreme poverty neighborhood is strongly predictive of violence (both in terms of criminality and victimization), and so African-Americans are overrepresented among criminals because they are overrepresented in these neighborhoods, due to racial segregation (12).

This increased rate of criminality might initially look like a moral failing of African-Americans, and this group has in fact been represented throughout American history as dangerously, inherently criminal, from the days of emancipation,[19] to the Moynihan report,[20] to the overrepresentation of African-Americans as criminals in the news (Phillips and Frost 133), to the high levels of "racial resentment" among white Americans, who attribute poor outcomes among African-Americans to individual character flaws, not structural inequality (Tuch and Hughes 149), to the election of Trump, which is best explained not by economic anxiety but by racial resentment (Smith and Hanley 207). Yet the connection between poverty and racism that Samson and Bean isolated in their research indicates that this racial disparity the culture focuses on as a collective character flaw of a minority is in fact a geographic disparity – a collective character flaw of the majority: its tolerance of racial segregation.

The news has begun in recent years to report on unequal treatment of minorities in our criminal justice system – such as the use of excessive force, over-policing, and sentencing disparities – and anecdotal videographic evidence of these problems circulates regularly through social media as well. Yet many of my students still seem reluctant to accept that structural inequality could explain the high rate of incarceration of African-American men in the U.S., as that is largely an interpretive argument (in that it looks at symptoms and asserts a cause). In this situation the use of empirical data may be more effective than abstract ideological argument alone. We spend a great deal of time teasing out the distinction between class and race, because it is critical to a structural-sociological understanding of crime that I hope will displace the individual-moral understanding most of my students bring to class. Not that individuals do not make the choice to engage in crime, but that the environments they are immersed in strongly affect the range of options available to them,

19 As the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University has documented (https://ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow).

20 https://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/moynchapter4.htm

and that poverty and racism make leaving those environments difficult for most. The intractability of an extreme poverty neighborhood and its restriction of the choices available to its residents are the very focus of *The Wire*.

THE WIRE: THE BIG SYSTEM ON THE SMALL SCREEN

The Wire (2002-2008) serves as a perfect example of the recent television trend of narrative complexity, and one of its main characters is a remarkable female detective, but its most significant feature is the argument it builds about the relationship between structural inequality and crime, which is unique among all other representations in the course. The activities and evidence described above provide a solid foundation of knowledge students bring to the show, so they can recognize and identify how the text builds its argument. As the lyrics of the opening theme suggest (*you gotta keep the devil/way down in the hole*), the series is not only about the crime in an extreme poverty neighborhood, but the way this neighborhood is isolated and penalized for much broader social problems inherent to American life.

I explain to my students that we see around us the reality that people of color are disproportionately poor, and disproportionately living in dysfunctional, impoverished ghettos; we see these large patterns, but rarely talk openly as a society about the reasons for them. Therefore, we are each left to draw our own conclusions, and the conclusion many draw (as indicated by the high levels of racial resentment Tuch and Hughes find among whites) is that there is something inherently wrong with people of color, especially African-Americans. This leads to a circular kind of logic, where we see evidence of inequality and mistake these symptoms for a cause. What is lacking is not the *what*; we already have the raw evidence of differential outcomes for various socioeconomic groups. What is missing is the *why*. Prejudice is therefore not a lack of information that's remedied simply by providing more information, but a filter through which we process information. It's the "why" we each supply as we interpret the evidence around us. More than anything else, then, disrupting prejudice requires an argument about "why."

The Wire, more than any other fictional series in television history, I would argue, provides this why. Its sole purpose, in fact, is the examination of why there is so much poverty and crime in one of the wealthiest nations on earth, why extreme poverty neighborhoods like the one it depicts lead to such poor life outcomes for their residents, and why the politicians, police, school system, unions, and citizens allow the problems to continue. The show implicitly asks, "Why is this happening?" and "Who benefits?" The answers its proposes are that individuals and social groups benefit economically, psychologically and professionally from monitoring and policing extreme poverty neighborhoods, even though the business of illegal drugs is spread across all of society. The series explores the intersections of inequality and crime by connecting them to key institutions of U.S. society, rather than focusing solely on the morality of criminals. Morality in *The Wire* is very gray, not black and white, and there are good guys and bad guys in *both* armies of the War on Drugs – the dealers of The Towers *and* the Baltimore police.

The strategy of the series is perfectly encapsulated in the opening scene, when Detective McNulty begins his investigation of the murder of a kid nicknamed Snot Boogie. Before our screening, I warn students that *The Wire* is a challenging show to watch, especially in the beginning, because of its narrative complexity.[21] One of the newest trends in recent television, narrative complexity is when the storyline is organized in a sophisticated, complex way that makes the viewer work hard to understand its meaning, rather than the spoon-fed, obvious didacticism of traditional TV. A show with narrative complexity often: has many intertwining stories, with many points of view you have to evaluate; is initially confusing, plunging you into the action midstream, or revealing its meaning gradually over time, or by jumping forward or backward in time; rewards your patience and close attention; and subtly shows rather than tells.

21 See Mittell for a detailed analysis of narrative complexity.

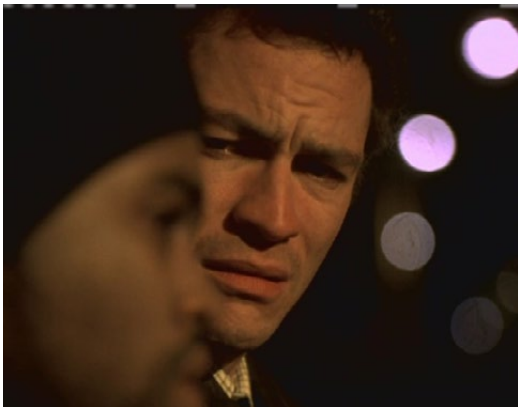

Image 7: *The Wire:* McNulty struggles to understand a senseless death

Image 8: *The Wire:* a young man's death is linked to larger patterns of inequality ("this is America")

The opening sequence (see Images 7 and 8) gives us no cues as to the significance of what we are watching and why, provides no background context as to who any of the characters are. It is a quiet, sad scene, shot with a realist aesthetic, and devoid of the usual affective controls of television: no music cues our emotions, no cameras zoom to direct our attention. We just listen in as two somber people sit in the dark, watching over the corpse of a child, trying to make sense of it. We see compassion and then confusion in McNulty's reaction shots, as we learn that every week Snot Boogie would try to rob the neighborhood kids' crap game, and every week they would catch him and beat him up. When McNulty asks why they let him keep playing, his informant replies, "Got to. This America, man." So from the first moment of the series, symbolic and structural parallels are drawn between the rigged systems of the larger society and the microcosm of The Towers.

We explore these parallels by carefully examining the first episode, which establishes the series' twin narrative structure, which considers similarities between two dysfunctional systems, The Towers, and the criminal justice system. Just as drug dealer D'Angelo gets in trouble with his boss (kingpin Avery Barksdale), Detective McNulty gets in trouble with his boss for pursuing an unauthorized investigation into Barksdale's gang. These episodes set up a clear pattern where both criminals and cops are trapped in corrupt systems, where their only options are to acquiesce to the system and be personally compromised (but survive and benefit), or fight the system and be destroyed, while the system lives on (with their immediate replacement.) Widely considered to be one of the best television shows ever created, *The Wire* uses some conventions of the police procedural, but broadens its scope to include an enormous ensemble cast, representing entire interconnected communities of different racial and economic classes. It is often described as Dickensian, both for its sprawling scope and its heart-breaking depiction of the cruelties extreme poverty neighborhoods inflict on children. It is remarkable not only for the quality of the writing and performances, but also for the compassion with which it treats its characters, in the parallels it draws between them as they navigate the symbiotic worlds of crime and law-enforcement.

The series indicts its viewers for our participation in and tolerance of a system that blames the moral failings of the larger culture on its scapegoats, the African-American poor of the inner city. Because the series pivots continually between the structural and individual, between the disadvantaged and socially dominant, it makes for a perfect case study of the intersections of race, class, and gender in American society. Because I prepare the students for the individual stories in *The Wire* by first examining the large cultural patterns they represent, I find students are now much more willing to discuss racism, poverty, and crime. This approach can be very helpful for working with groups whose individual levels of understanding of inequality vary widely, too. For some, critical analysis of American culture is very new and deeply threatening to the beliefs they

have been taught by their families and communities. For them, grounded aesthetics is a way to ease them into these discussions by showing rather than telling that profound inequality exists. Other students may be painfully, personally aware of inequality, yet they can also benefit from developing these analytical tools, so they are better prepared to demonstrate how their personal experiences are reflective of larger trends, and how popular culture texts address the cultural myths around them. For both groups, demonstrating that the compassionate perspective of *The Wire* is grounded in factual accuracy can serve as a powerful response to the dehumanization of people of color that has been reignited and mainstreamed in recent years.[22]

CONCLUSION

By the end of the semester, my students can argue much more persuasively about the ideology of a text and its likely social meaning, because they have developed the tools for conducting detailed textual analyses and learned how to connect these to broad social experiences. The grounded aesthetics approach meets students where they are at, which is often developmentally oriented toward concrete information and culturally oriented toward individualism. Rather than simply telling students inequality exists, using large data sets shows them the concrete evidence they need to see in order to be persuaded that large disparities in outcomes exist for members of lower-status groups. Similarly, rather than telling students the ideological meaning of a text, showing them how the text constructs meaning provides them with concrete details they need to see in order to be persuaded that the particular choices made were purposeful representational techniques. The twin halves of my grounded aesthetics approach, big data and aesthetics, operate in tandem to help students develop the skills needed to connect the concrete and individual with the abstract and social.

Grounded aesthetics is therefore a very effective way of teaching students how to analyze the ideology in the details of entertainment media, but it has a side benefit as well: it also offers many parallel techniques for dismantling the power of ideology to shape news coverage, social media, and debates in everyday life. By modeling a style of argumentation that is attentive to details and context, interpretive yet grounded in evidence, it provides a powerful response to the belief that the humanities' concern with inequality is a subjective agenda rather than a disciplined engagement with reality. Moving forward, our challenge as teachers of popular culture will be to continually confront and demythologize the ever-changing iterations of "fake news" justifying inequality, whether in fictional entertainment, social media, or the news. Nothing could be more important in the bewildering "post-truth" era we are teaching in and living through.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their feedback.

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REFERENCE CITATION

APA

Cragin, B. (2018). Grounded Aesthetics: Pedagogy for a Post-Truth Era. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. *5*(3). add hyperlink

MLA

Cragin, Becca. "Grounded Aesthetics: Pedagogy for a Post-Truth Era." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. 2018, vol 5, no 3. add hyperlink