

Media Literacy in Modern Life

[THEME MUSIC]

CORY: Hi, this is Cory with the WSU Global Connection. I am just doing a quick introduction. David Leonard is an associate professor in the Department of Critical Culture, Gender, and Race Studies at Washington State University, Pullman.

He has written on sports, video games, film, and social movements appearing in both popular and academic mediums. His work explores the political economy of popular culture, examining the interplay between racism, state violence, and popular representation through contextual, textual, and subtextual analysis.

He is the author of *Screens Fade to Black*, *Contemporary African American Cinema*, and forthcoming *After Arttest*, *the NBA and the Assault on Blackness*. You can follow him on Twitter @dr_djl.

DAVID LEONARD: All right. Thank you for joining me today. So I thought I would talk, today, about rituals-- not that there's any time of year that we can't talk about rituals and the way that rituals function in relationship to commercialization, to mass media, to race and gender. But there's something about January and February where we see ritualized practices really on full display.

Really, starting in December with Christmas and New Year's, and then into the Super Bowl, and now Valentine's Day, we really get this kind of barrage of ritualized practices that are really based in consumption-- conspicuous consumption. And so I want us to think about that in relationship to rituals, that we really cannot imagine a society without our rituals, and while historically and in past societies, rituals were central outside of consumption.

We could talk about secular. We could talk about the religious. We could talk about, you know, even right now with Mardi Gras going on, the specific history of Mardi Gras that's been erased, or is often erased, as it's been transported out of that space.

But rituals are really central to any society. They're entrenched. They're commonplace. They're what carry cultural practices, identities, communities from generation to generation. It also becomes part of an imagined community, that a sense of community which can often be divided by race, gender, geography, inequalities. That imagining community becomes a reality through these ritualized practices.

Because it's so central to communal and individual identities, rituals are often difficult to be critical of because they say something about ourselves, about our community. They often bring joy. We often have nostalgia for them, whether it be the moment where we got a present from our parents during Christmas or that first Super Bowl that we watched with the whole family.

These all become part of our memories. And so nostalgia is entrenched in ritualized practices, but also what we would call spectacles.

Guy Debord, whose Society of Spectacle identifies the relationship between consumption and mass media and that leads to this kind of mediated spectacle where everything's massive, where it's all about consumption, where it's about the spectacular. And Debord says "that the spectacle is not a collection of images but of social relation among people mediated by images." And so those rituals become those mediated images and that becomes the link to which that imagined community is created.

So we can think about rituals as spectacle and spectacle as rituals. So it's really important to push the conversation about media beyond either/or, beyond the binary to think about how a spectacle can be a ritual-- and it can have multiple meanings-- but also can be about consumption. It can be about transmitting narratives about the nation. It can be about multiple things.

And so I wanted to spend a little bit of time talking about two of these rituals, one that just passed-- the Super Bowl-- and looking at a few commercials as part of the ritualized process and also part of the spectacle of the Super Bowl, and then Valentine's Day.

And so just to give a little context, really, and people say this all the time now-- it used to be the argument that scholars would make about the Super Bowl-- and that was that it was America's biggest secular holiday. That, you know, when we look at other rituals, whether we're talking about Christmas or Easter and-- to differing degrees-- other holidays, that they're very much tied up and connected to religious traditions.

The Super Bowl is one event where it doesn't have any historic origins that link it to religion and, therefore, it's our biggest and most profound secular holiday. And it's been interesting to listen to people say that without any thought, without any critique, to say that it's a secular holiday. And the other thing that you see when people make that argument is it's a way of disarming and silencing those who have critiques about the Super Bowl, whether it be the violence on the field and the effects of that violence on players in terms of concussion, whether it be because of the ritualized sexism that's built into football, or the consumption that people will say, well, that's what you do on Super Bowl Sunday. What happens on Super Sunday stays in Super Bowl Sunday.

So it becomes ritualized, that it becomes a space of family and friends. You hear people say, well, I don't even like football, but it's a reason to get together. These all become part of the ritualized experience and people do the same things over and over again. And you see that going in to supermarkets in the weeks before the Super Bowl, what's on display, you know? Soda, chips, beer, soda, chips, beer, you know, the new food pyramid.

And I think thinking about how ritualized that comes through the supermarket is a way to really think about how spectacle and ritual operate together-- that we almost don't need a calendar

anymore, that we can just look at the supermarket and through the displays, through the massive spectacle, whether it be the biggest heart you've ever seen or a cutout of a football player, that is our calendar. That is a way of reminding what our rituals are. And that least to not only partaking in these rituals, like, hey, it's Super Bowl Sunday. Better do something. I don't want to be that one person not doing anything.

But it encourages us to participate in particular ways. So it's not a surprise that on Super Bowl Sunday this is what we see. We see eight million total pounds of popcorn that's consumed, you see 28 million pounds of potato chips, 53.5 million pounds of avocados.

Now I don't think when growing up, people said eat your vegetables that this is what they had in mind. They didn't have in mind popcorn, potato chips, and avocados. But that is really central to football and Super Bowl Sunday, not to mention beer, soda, and any number of other things.

I mean, we're talking one billion chicken wings on a Super Bowl Sunday, 325.5 million gallons of beer. You could fill up almost 500 Olympic-sized swimming pools with all that beer. And so the Super Bowl is about consumption. The game is an excuse for consumption, and not just food. I mean, you see a matched increase in people purchasing televisions prior to Super Bowl Sunday, and any number of consumptive practices that contributes to the spectacle.

And part of that spectacle is the game, part of it is the food, part of it is the militarism that we see at the game with the fly overs from stealth bombers, from the various practices that entrench violence in the game. It comes from the sexualized images that are evident at the game, whether it be from cheerleaders or in the commercials. And so I want us to think about how the commercials themselves become ritualized and as a spectacle, where the extreme, where consumption become central to the Super Bowl experience. So I want to look at a few commercials and then we can talk about this for a few minutes. So I'm going to do the Volkswagen commercial.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[DING]

-I hate Mondays.

-Yeah, they're the worst.

-No worries, man. Everything will be all right.

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah, man.

[BANG BANG]

Oh, don't fret, me brother. The sticky bun comes soon. Yeah. Wicked coffee, Mr. Jim. Julia, turn the frown the other way around.

-Hey Dave, you're from Minnesota, right?

Yes I, the Land of 10,000 Lakes, the Gopher State.

-So in conclusion, things are pretty dismal.

-You know what this room needs? A smile. Who want to come with I?

(SINGING) Traveling along, there's a song that we're singing.

(ALL SINGING) Come on, get happy, yeah.

-You guys are three minutes late.

-Don't be no cloud on a sunny day.

-Yeah, chill, Webster.

-Sir?

-Respect boss man.

[LAUGHTER]

(ALL SINGING) Come on, get happy. Yeah.

NARRATOR: That's the power of German engineering.

[END PLAYBACK]

DAVID LEONARD: Before we move onto the next one, I just wanted to emphasize what is going on in this commercial, beyond, I mean, there's so much that one could talk about and there was a lot of discussion about the commercial. But I think just the mere fact that it played on Super Sunday is something to consider, that that becomes part of the Super Bowl experience. Really, again, that on the Super Bowl, the rules are different.

And so here we have a commercial that really perpetuates the stereotypes about Jamaicans as happy and relaxed and just enjoying life, that it plays upon narratives of [? that ?] cultural appropriation that being Jamaican is a state of mind, that one can be Jamaican just by changing their outlook and how they speak, and that will bring joy and happiness. But it also plays into these narratives of consumption. But the reason some people, such as the Jamaican tourist

board, celebrate the commercial is because it promoted consumption. It promoted consumption not only in terms of going out and buying a Volkswagen, and doing so with a Jamaican accent, but of course, going to Jamaica.

And so it contributes to this larger narrative about pleasure, about joy, about consumption and that joy and pleasure comes from that consumption. And in doing so, like the Super Bowl itself, it erases the larger context. The Super Bowl erases the context of the pain and trauma of football, the longstanding injuries, the concussions and their impact, players retiring in poverty, players at the age of 40 going lunch and not remembering what they ordered. That's all erased.

Likewise, these images of Jamaica as tourist destination as the exotic, as happy, erases the larger context of poverty, of the effects of transnational capitalism, of the effects of economies based in tourism, and the effects of the IMF and the World Bank and policies in that regard. And so you see that erasure. And that erasure is accepted because of the ritual, because of the rationalized experience of the commercial. So second commercial we're going to look at is the Dodge farmer ad.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

PAUL HARVEY: And on the eighth day, God looked down on his planned paradise and said, I need a caretaker. So God made a farmer. God said, I need somebody willing to get up before dawn, milk cows, work all day in the fields, milk cows again, eat supper, then go to town and stay past midnight at the meeting of the school board. So God made a farmer.

God said, I need somebody willing to sit up all night with a newborn colt, and watch it die, then dry his eyes and say, maybe next year. I need somebody who can shape an axe handle from a persimmon sprout, shoe a horse with a hunk of car tire, who can make harness out of s feed sacks, and shoe scraps. Who, planting time and harvest season, will finish his 40 hour week by Tuesday noon and then paining from tractor back, put in another 72 hours. So God made a farmer.

God said, I need somebody strong enough to clear trees and heave bails, yet gentle enough to yeon lambs, and wean pigs, and tend the pink-combed pullets, who will stop his mower for an hour to split the broken leg of a meadowlark. So God made a farmer.

It had to be somebody who'd plow deep and straight not cut corners, somebody to seed, weed, feed, breath, and rake, and disk, and plow, and plant, and tie the fleece, and strain the milk, somebody who'd bale a family together with the soft, strong bonds of sharing, who would laugh, and then sigh, and then reply with smiling eyes when his son says that he wants to spend his life doing what dad does. So God made a farmer.

[END PLAYBACK]

-So again, lots to talk about, lots to think about in terms of what is being sold beyond a car, and if a car is actually being sold at all, but it is in the background. How race and gender fit into that commercial, in that the farmers are imagined through white male bodies, thereby erasing the longstanding history of African American farmers, of Latino farmers, of Japanese American farmers.

You know, we think about the history of Japanese American farmers in California whose land was stripped and taken from them following, you know, we're talking right around World War I, the creation of alien land laws that said only citizens could own land, and that Japanese were excluded from that, based on the 1790s Naturalization Act that said only whites could be citizens. And so you have that commercial, which really erases that because in this context, God didn't create the farmer, legislation did. Subsidies did. Legislation that took away land from one segment of the population and gave it to another created farmers.

So that's an important context. Historically and then into today, in terms of the erasure of Latino [INAUDIBLE] Mexican American farmers who work tirelessly in fields, whether we're talking California to Florida, from Washington to North Carolina. And that's erased. And it's not only erased through the absence of Latinos in the commercial-- people said there might be one in there-- but really, the kind of celebratory, farming is beautiful narrative. That's something to consider.

Also, the commercial really plays into this notion of farming being this noble, beautiful process where not only do people grow from boys to men-- white people grow from boys to man, but that we get our fruits and vegetables and our ice cream through these farms. And it has us really nostalgic for a time when farms were owned by families, and that they were small farms, and they provided the food in that community.

So really erasing the realities of corporate farming. Old McDonald doesn't exist. It's Mr. McDonald, esquire that exists. That's who has a farm. Old McDonald doesn't have a farm anymore. And this commercial plays on that. But it also plays on this notion of a work ethic, the American dream, bootstraps, that people are working hard in these spaces. And by imagining that ethic, that notion of American exceptionalism, that idea of patriotism through white male bodies, it's making those elements, those characteristics only available to white males.

But again part of the ritual of the Super Bowl comes in consuming these commercials, and doing so rather uncritically, and not thinking about the larger message and meaning, and what is being sold beyond the product, that what is being sold here is a vision of America, just like what is being sold at the Super Bowl is a vision of America. So I want to end the commercials with this final commercial from Audi.

And it should be noted that the three commercials we did select are all car commercials. And we can think about, well, what's going on in terms of that, in terms of cars being so central to the spectacle and ritual of the Super Bowl.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

-Look at you, so dashing. Come on. Nowadays lots of people go by themselves.

-No, they don't.

-Yeah.

-Hey, son. Have fun tonight.

[REVVING ENGINE]

[MUSIC -- CAGE THE ELEPHANT, "BACK AGAINST THE WALL"]

-Prom.

[LAUGHTER]

[SQUEALING TIRES]

[MUSIC -- CAGE THE ELEPHANT, "BACK AGAINST THE WALL"]

[CROWD GASPING]

-Owww!

-Whoo!

-Hey!

[MUSIC -- CAGE THE ELEPHANT, "BACK AGAINST THE WALL"]

-Owwwwww.

[END PLAYBACK]

DAVID LEONARD: I mean, this is a commercial that's promoting sexual violence, it's promoting and celebrating a youth, a young man who really is performing his masculinity through his car, through his swagger, and through sexually assaulting a young woman-- going up and really throwing himself at her. And then he gets punched, presumably, by the young woman's boyfriend, partner. And he leaves with a grin of satisfaction.

I think it's really troubling that this is the narrative, this is the discussion, or this is the image that is being presented as a desired masculinity, that the power comes from his ability to, you know, have quote unquote "courage." Courage is not sexual assault. And I think it's especially, it

should give us pause, again, in the context of the Super Bowl because part of the ritual is that commercials are extreme.

They're pushing the boundaries. And therefore, an image, a narrative, such as this goes unnoticed. It goes unremarked. But it normalizes sexual violence. It normalizes-- it makes society where sexual violence is entrenched in culture.

I think on a Super Bowl, of all moments, is especially remarkable. And you know, I'll just say a few things, just to give a little bit of background because there's a lot of debate about whether the Super Bowl is the day where there's the most number of cases of domestic violence, of assault. And there's lots of literature and there's lots of debate. And part of the debate is that people will say, well, the Super Bowl doesn't see any more cases, as if that makes it less of an injustice that we should be focused on than other rituals.

And so, you know, one study found that it appears that the Super Bowl has all the elements to spark holiday related domestic violence-- increased expectations, close domestic interaction, and alcohol consumption. So that the ritual itself, whether we're talking about the ritual of the Super Bowl or the ritual of Christmas or Thanksgiving, those conditions lead to violence, as well as Jackson Katz, co-founder and director of MVP Strategies, talks about gambling, he talks about parties, the fact that most people aren't working, they're at home, they're in these close proximity.

Again, the ritualized violence at the game, in the commercials, and in the home is something that we need to consider and think about, and how all of that gets erased through consumption, through the pleasure of these rituals. And that's really fundamental to what I want us to think about today, is how in rituals, in the spectacle of rituals, in the context of rituals that exist in a late capitalist system are about consumption that put property in front of people. And no ritual might embody this more than Valentine's Day.

So I'm just going to talk for a few minutes about Valentine's Day to get us to think about how Valentine's Day, as a ritual, is really ritualizing consumption, but also ritualizing practices that put things, objects-- objects that are infused with meaning-- but they're objects that also strip away the content and meaning of production. You know, that something like a chocolate bar has meaning. And that meaning on Valentine's Day is love, appreciation, relationships. Its meaning isn't in who produced it, under what conditions this chocolate bar was made.

And so the ritual strips away particular meanings while infusing others. And so it's no wonder that we think about Valentine's Day as this moment to shower, literally, appreciation through products. So recent studies found that men spend close to \$170 on clothing, jewelry, and other gifts for Valentine's Day. And I want us to think about, what does it mean that men spend about \$170 and women spend half that, at \$85?

How is this entrenched and connected to patriarchy? How is it a way of a ritual that excuses, that becomes consumptive penance for patriarchy, for glass ceilings, for quality, for sexual

violence, that this becomes a way of saying, well, yeah, but look at all these gifts. \$170. And that includes \$4.52 per person on presents for pets. Pets, \$4.52.

And that's a total of \$1.8 billion spent each year on Valentine's Day. That's \$1.6 billion on candy, \$1.9 billion on flowers, \$4.4 billion will be spent on jewelry. Consumption. Consumption is that ritual.

And when we look at every point on the axis of consumption, we see consumption that erases violence, that erases pain, that erases trauma, that erases exploitation. I mean, even when we think about things like going to a restaurant, that how the labor, how the lack of respect, how the exploitation of restaurant workers is erased in this moment, in this night, to celebrate love. Where's the love for them? Where's the love for those who produce roses?

And I know when we watch a commercial like the Dodge commercial and others, it contributes to this narrative of roses being made at the local garden or produced at the local garden, well, the vast majority of roses are imported from South America, particularly places like Ecuador. Those who work on these rose plantations are disproportionately women, 70%. There's about 50,000 workers working in these spaces under horrible working conditions, low wages.

And to be clear, when we talk about low wages, people often say, well, you know, that's a lot of money there. No, actually the wages there are not a lot. And the wages that are garnered in these rose industries are lower than minimum wage. And I just want to read this from an article that came out a few years ago from Mother Jones because it encapsulates how this ritual erases these experiences from young women.

"Women stand at tables, hands flying as they sort roses by the length and size of the head, arranging them in bunches of 25. Teenagers, mostly boys, run from the table, carrying the roses to the next room. The flowers have already been treated with chemicals to kill insects and mildew .

Now they are dunked in preservatives to keep them from rotting during their journey through US Customs. After being wrapped in cellophane and boxed. The flowers are chilled and flown overnight to Miami. By the time they reach florists and supermarkets across the country, a rose that cost less than \$0.17 to produce in Ecuador will sell for as much as \$8."

These women make roughly about \$140 a month under horrible conditions. We're talking conditions that include insecticides that are banned in 13 nations. This is not part of the ritual that we're sold. We're not sold the ritual of a rose that is soiled in pain, that is produced under these conditions. We're not sold in the ritual of the holiday of love.

We're not sold what happens in the cacao farms of West Africa, places where young boys whose ages range from 12 to 16 have been sold into slave labor and are forced to work in cocoa farms. There are about 600,000 farms in Cote d'Ivoire, or the Ivory Coast. And estimates have found that children are forced to work as slaves on these farms are as high as 15,000. They live

under horrible working conditions, separated from their families. They arrive, often being told that they're going to get a new bike or a new opportunity.

And so here's the story of a little boy by the name of Ali. He was 11 years old when he was lured by a slave trader to go work on a farm. The locator told him that he would not only receive a bicycle, but he could also help his parent with the \$150 he would earn.

"However, life on the farm of Le Gros, or the Big Man, was nothing like Ali had imagined. He and other workers had to work from 6:00 in the morning til about 6:30 at night in the fields. Because the bags were so heavy, he had trouble carrying them and always fell down.

The farmer would beat him until he stood back up and lifted the bag again. Ali was beaten the most because the farmer accused him of never working hard enough. The little boy still has scars left from the bike chains and cocoa tree branches that the man used. He and the other slaves were not fed well. They often had to eat burnt bananas and corn paste."

Is this what we're being sold? This changes our understanding of the love day, the day of love. Because clearly we've been told that we express our love through buying these things. But are we expressing our love for people like Ali?

And just to finish off, we could also talk about how much paper we spend on greeting cards, 71 million tons of paper per year. And what are the costs and consequences in terms of the environment, in terms of chemicals in the environment, in terms of communities?

But lastly, diamonds. The diamond industry, and particularly the De Beers family, launched in 1946, a campaign of a diamond is forever. And so here we have, really, the ultimate example of ritualized consumption, ritualized and entrenched in the marriage industry, entrenched in things like Valentine's Day.

And, you know, whether it's sold as a diamond is forever or a quote unquote "diamonds are a girl's best friend," how is that ritual being imagined? It's being imagined through the realities of blood diamonds? Is it being imagined by the fact that only 11% of jewelry stores in the United States carry conflict-free diamonds, and 67% won't even discuss it?

Is it something we talk about that the fact that Sierra Leone exports 500,000 carats of diamonds annually worth \$78 billion dollars? \$78 billion each year. Yet, it's one of the poorest countries in the world. Is a diamond their best friend? Where's the love? Where's the appreciation? Where's the larger context of understanding?

And so here we have, like flowers, like chocolate, like commercials in the Super Bowl, like the Super Bowl itself, rituals become a space where not only consumption is central in our late capitalist moment, but those rituals perpetuate and erase inequalities. Those rituals erase the pain and trauma that our own practices enable, and create, and reproduce.

And so ultimately, what we see in these ritualized moments is, the ritual is putting objects in front of people, putting the ritual in front of people. So the ritual of giving chocolate, of giving diamonds, of watching men ram their heads into each other, even though it is clear-- based on the science that it's having effects long term effects, on their health. That's the ritual.

The ritual of commercials takes precedent. The joy of, let's watch the commercials, takes precedence over the effects of a commercial that normalizes sexual violence, that erases the conditions of poverty in a place like Jamaica. These are all examples of how the ritual in itself is about the pleasure of objects over people. So I'll stop there, see if we have some questions, or comments, or thoughts. And then, yeah.

Well, again, thank you so much for joining us. It was good to talk about these rituals. And hopefully, the challenge is to look at these moments of ritual where we're told to just go with the flow, to not spoil the party, and critically analyze it. So thank you.