

Desperate Culture: An Analysis of “I Love Lucy” and “Desperate Housewives”

L.A. Harvell¹ and E.R. Lamm¹

¹*Elliott School of Communication, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260, U.S.A.*

1. Introduction

The Shows “Desperate Housewives,” which is currently airing on television and “I Love Lucy,” a 1950’s sitcom constitutes a family and marital relationships and the roles a society expect housewives to play. This presentation focuses on the rhetorical elements of “I Love Lucy” and “Desperate Housewives” with a particular focus how they construct women’s roles at home and whether violence against women who stay home is portrayed as a norm. Cultivation theory, developed by George Gerbner in the late 1960s and early 1970s, is used as a lens in the study. This theory which not only asserts that the media play important roles in our daily lives, especially television, do but our concept of what is normal. Thus, because shows provide a picture of what is important and what is morally right, an examination of their construction of how morals, values, sex, violence, and women tell us about the norms held by typical Americans. By comparing the elements in these shows we can demonstrate what contemporary culture sees as socially acceptable, but also compare that to the behavior that was socially acceptable during the popularity of “I Love Lucy.”

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

We define violence as any overt act with the potential to cause harm or actual harming of the self or others. There are examples of violence in both television shows; however, the violence in “I Love Lucy” seems minimal compared to the violence displayed in “Desperate Housewives.” If we look at crime trends today, we can see that not only the number of crimes committed is on the rise, but the amount of violent crime is also increasing [1]. These statistics show through in “Desperate Housewives.” The number of acts of crime is significantly more than “I Love Lucy.” The types of crime are also much harsher in that they deal with domestic abuse, child abuse, murder, and suicide. In the series premiere of “Desperate Housewives,” Mary Alice Young’s voice is heard telling us that her day was like any other ordinary day. “I made breakfast for my family...I performed my chores...I ran my errands...I completed my projects” [2]. The next scene shows Mary Alice taking a loaded gun out of a box in the closet and pointing it at her head. We hear the shot go off and see Mary Alice lying in a pool of her own blood.

During the span of “I Love Lucy,” women were seen as the typical housewife. Woman would iron the clothes, make breakfast, and clean the house until their husbands came home in the evening to home cooked meals. “Desperate Housewives”, on the other hand, does not show only housewives, but divorced women living on Wisteria Lane, the housewives that are shown, are what society in 2005 considers normal. Viewers who watched “I Love Lucy” weekly in the 1950’s would continue to expect that women’s primary roles include cooking, cleaning, and ironing for their husbands. They would believe that this is what all women are subjected to, and that it is normal. Viewers in 2005 who viewed “Desperate Housewives” are shown images of married and divorced women. However, the married women still care for their husbands much like Lucy did.

The morals and values in 1950 were in some ways different and in some ways similar to the morals and values of today. For example in 1950, the value of having a loving marriage was something that Americans wanted desperately to have. In 2005, the value of having a loving marriage is still something that Americans need. Although a love-filled marriage has been valued in both periods, the morals are quite different. For example, “Desperate Housewives” frequently refers to Edy as the “slut.” In “I Love Lucy,” every woman was portrayed as a respectable housewife, and if they were single, there was no sexual reference made. This gives the impression that in 1950, it

was not okay to be promiscuous, while in 2005, “Desperate Housewives” is setting the example that promiscuity is okay. The value of materialism played an important role in both “I Love Lucy” and “Desperate Housewives.” It seems as though materialism was just as important in 1950 as it is today, in 2005.

By looking at the roles that sex and sex appeal played on television in the 1950s and 1960s, we see images that were socially acceptable during those two decades. Lucy and Ricky are never seen kissing passionately; they only exchange quick “pecks” on the lips and only in 5 of the 22 episodes viewed. They were never seen engaging in sexual intercourse, which matches the etiquette of the men and women in society at the time. Compare those images with the scenes from “Desperate Housewives” and you will have a vastly different picture. For example, Gabrielle and Edy are always dressed in revealing clothing, sometimes even showing portions of their breasts or buttocks.

3. Conclusions

Signorielli and Morgan (1996) write that “story-telling” is a key concept in the theory of cultivation analysis. “As humans we communicate by the manipulation of complex symbol systems. We have neither personally nor directly experienced great portions of what we know or think we know; we know about many things based on the stories we hear and the stories we tell.” Before the development of television, stories about one’s culture were told face to face. Today, television does most of the story telling for us. “Therefore the cultural process of story-telling is now in the hands of global commercial interests who have something to sell, and who in effect operate outside the reach of democratic decision-making” [3]. It is not that society suddenly accepts the images of suicide, scantily dressed women, and affairs with multiple partners; through entertainment programming we have been slowly and carefully cultivated so that we become desensitized to it. According to their producers, “I Love Lucy” and “Desperate Housewives” are icons within their respective time periods. In other words, they are telling us these show represent our society as a whole. It is this idea that begins the process of cultivation.

4. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr. Susan Schultz Huxman for sponsoring our research endeavor.

[1] (2001). United States Crime Rates 1960-2004. Retrieved from the World Wide Website: <http://www.disastercenter.com/crime/uscrime.htm>.

[2] Cherry, M. & Spezialy, T. (producers). (2005). Desperate Housewives [Series 1]. Hollywood: ABC.

[3] Signorielli, N., & Morgan M. (1990). Cultivation Analysis: New directions in Media Effects Research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications