

LESSON: WOMEN AS BACKGROUND DECORATION PART 1 (65 MINUTES)

In this lesson or series of lessons, students will watch the 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 1' video from the Feminist Frequency series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*. Students will be exposed to various concepts (i.e. objectification) through a consideration of female Non-Playable Characters (NPCs) in video games that will help frame larger discussions surrounding the experiences and treatment of women in media and society. Students will analyze various forms of media (mass media such as advertising vs. interactive media) and will reflect on their own roles as media participants and consumers. Students will be given tools to question media and how women are 'used', and will consider the broader implications of the exploitation of female characters.

LEARNING GOALS

By the end of this lesson/series of lessons, students/viewers will:

1. Explore the following concepts, both in the context of video games and through their real world manifestations and implications: *objectification, dehumanization, power differentials (gendered), and various forms of violence against women;*
2. Consider the differences between mass media and interactive media, and their power to influence both individual and social thought and action;
3. Use Martha Nussbaum's objectification theory as a lens to analyze and discuss the treatment of female characters in video games and other media, and as a way to frame the consequences of the trope

MATERIALS

- Computer
- Projector
- Printed copies of 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 1' note companions
- Magazines or images from fashion advertising

Before: Minds On

This lesson explores the way interactive media functions differently from mass media with regards to the objectification and exploitation of media. Having students work first with images allows for an opportunity to familiarize them with concepts such as objectification, exoticization and dehumanization. Divide students up into pairs and provide them with fashion magazines and/or images from fashion advertising. Ask them to write down a detailed description of exactly what they see, leaving out no small detail. Depending on the class, it may be better to have this activity be a discussion between partners. Students will have 1 minute before rotating images (3-4 rotations). **[10 MINUTES]**

Work through the definitions of objectification, exoticization and dehumanization with the class, building 'concept maps' on the board as students provide what they think each word means. Ask students in pairs to briefly discuss if and how these terms apply to the images they performed detailed descriptions of. **[10 MINUTES]**

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During Action!

Watch the 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 1' video. Below are listed significant places to pause as opportunities for embedded discussion or activities, or simply due to time restraints:

- 1:10 Women as Promotional Material
- 2:50 'Women as Background Decoration' trope defined
- 4:55 Sexual Objectification defined
- 7:50 Sexual Objectification in Mass Media vs. Interactive Media
- 10:00 Game Mechanics and Objectification
- 10:20 Martha Nussbaum and Objectification Theory: *Instrumentality* (10:50); *Commodification* (12:15); *Interchangability* (14:20)
- 17:35 Sexual Objectification and Violence Against Women and 'objecthood', Objectification Theory continued: *Violability* (18:25); *Disposability and dehumanization* (18:35)
- 22:50 In-game 'consequences' and sandbox style games;
- 26:00 Exploitation of Female vs. Male NPCs
- 28:25 Broader Consequences of the trope **[35 MINUTES]**

Differentiated Instruction:

- Note companions to help students work through definitions and content, including collaboration following viewing;
- 'Pause and Reflect' opportunities throughout viewing
- Emphasis on the use of visual examples

After: Consolidation & Connection

Following the video, ask students to consider the images they worked with before watching the video, and ask the following questions:

- How do the concepts discussed in the video apply to the images you worked with in our description activity? Did these concepts change how you feel about the advertisements you looked at?
- A clear difference between advertising and other forms of media and interactive media is established in the 'Women as Background Decoration' video. Compare one of the images you described and discussed with what you saw taking place in video games where female NPCs are exploited – what similarities do you notice between the two forms? What differences?
- Do you think the participatory aspect of video games impacts how we are influenced by media that exploits and objectifies women? How might we understand this difference and what can be done to develop more responsible, respectful and inclusive media? **[10 MINUTES]**

POST-VIDEO ACTIVITY OPTIONS**1. Debate**

There is scientific work done that shows a correlation between media and social influence. However, there is also a widespread belief that media does not impact society. This conversation is an important one, and a debate provides an opportunity for students to explore their own opinions and those of their peers. Drawing from the 'Women as Background Decoration' video and trope, ask students to respond to the following question: Does media content influence individuals and, by extension, society? Why or why not? Divide students into teams and assign them a position on the subject. One team/some teams will argue against media influence and the other team/s will argue the validity of claims that the media influences society. Students will be encouraged to draw from personal experiences and examples in their arguments.

2. Advertising vs. Interactive Media

Jean Kilbourne in her series "Killing Us Softly" provides a look at objectification through the lens of advertising. This activity involves viewing the latest edition in her series ("Killing Us Softly 4") and comparing the objectification, exoticization and, ultimately, the dehumanization of women in advertising with that of interactive media outlined in the video 'Women as Background Decoration'. Students will be asked to compare (in greater depth than allowed in the introductory activity in the lesson itself) how traditional media and interactive media objectify women in different ways, and consider the spectator vs. participant relationship as it relates to their own media consumption. Students will be asked to write a one-page opinion piece on the subject and how they view the differences between these forms of media.

Alternative: Students can pick one image or series of images from advertising and one video game (either one from the 'Women as Background Decoration' video or one of their choosing) that they believe objectifies, exoticizes, and/or dehumanizes women, and create a 5 minute presentation where they compare the two media items.

Students can either watch the trailer for "Killing Us Softly 4" or view the entire video. A link to this trailer is on Kilbourne's website: <http://www.jeankilbourne.com/videos/>

3. Music Video Critique

Many music videos employ similar approaches with regards to the treatment of women. For this activity, students will be asked to 'critique' a music video through the various components of Nussbaum's objectification theory. Students will be asked to include a section for 'Further Implications' as it relates to culture and society, by being posed the following question: How are the things you observed in this video through the lens of objectification theory harmful to societal images of women? What suggestions might you have for making media more inclusive and respectful of women?

The final critique can take the form of a blog, video blog, verbal presentation, or written composition depending on individual class goals for the assignment.