THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF AMERICAN IMAGES:
The Paradox

Subheading

Written By
Jennifer Saunders

THE PARADOX

A QUESTION THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

In 1978, during my first year as a student at Montclair State University, an instructor made a statement that would quietly shape the next three decades of my life:"

The role of the media is to **divide us** along the lines of **race, class, and sex,** while promoting the myth of the upwardly mobile American ensuring that those who control the wealth **remain in power."**

At nineteen, I had never heard an idea that so directly challenged my assumptions about American culture.

At the time, television felt entertaining, and music felt liberating.

The question that lingered—one I did not yet know how to ask—was simple but profound: **How does media actually do this?**

That question became the **foundation** of my lifelong inquiry into the psychological, cultural, and political power of images.

Several years later, while working as a public school teacher, I encountered an early **music video** that clarified what my professor had only suggested.

Private Dancer, directed by **Brian Gant** and featuring **Tina Turner,** used camera angles, movement, and visual symbolism to convey a powerful narrative about gender, power, and commodification— without ever **explicitly stating its message.**

In just over four minutes, the video demonstrated how images bypass rational analysis and **speak directly** to emotion and identity.

Women were portrayed as mechanized performers—objects of desire, exchange, and control. The message was not delivered through dialogue, but through **visual language.**

That experience crystallized a realization that would guide my work: media does not merely reflect reality—**it actively constructs meaning**.

CONSUMERISM OVER COMMUNITY

INDIVIDUALISM OVER COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Over time, my research revealed a **troubling pattern**.

A small number of powerful corporations—often **six to ten conglomerates**—exercise disproportionate control over what Americans read, see, hear, and consume.

These entities do not merely distribute information; they **shape values.**

The **dominant narratives promoted** through **mass media** increasingly reinforce:

- Consumerism over community

- Competition over cooperation

- Individualism over collective responsibility

The objective is not cultural enrichment or democratic participation, but **profit preservation** and **power maintenance.**

Educational Reformer, John Dewey warned more than a century ago that democracy loses meaning when corporate **control the means of communication.**

His warning is more relevant today than ever.

WHY FILM IS THE MOST POWERFUL MEDIUM WE KNOW

Film and visual media are uniquely powerful because they engage the **subconscious.**

Images influence **emotion, behavior,** and even **physical responses** before critical thought has time to intervene.

Filmmakers and advertisers deliberately use:

- Camera **angles** to convey dominance or vulnerability

- **Color** psychology to trigger emotional responses

- **Shapes, symbols, and familiar imagery** to create **subconscious** associations

These techniques are not **neutral.** They are **designed** to persuade.

When combined with sound, pacing, narrative framing, and repetition, images become **tools capable of shaping belief systems at scale.**

IMAGES AS PERSUASION

THE DIGITAL AGE: DOPAMINE, DISTRACTION, AND DIVISION

Social media platforms have refined these techniques further.

Former technology executives have openly acknowledged that many platforms were **engineered to exploit dopamine responses**—short bursts of pleasure triggered by likes, shares, and **engagement metrics**.

What replaces dialogue, critical thinking, and civic discourse are **emotional reactions masquerading** as **truth**.

As recent history has shown, these systems have influenced **elections**, amplified **misinformation**, and deepened social **division**—not by accident, but by **design**.

Democratization of Media— and Its Limits

The introduction of cameras into mobile phones fundamentally changed media production.

For the **first time in history**, billions of people gained the ability to **document, share, and circulate their own stories**.

This shift **democratized access to media tools** and allowed communities to see themselves reflected in public narratives.

Youth movements, grassroots organizing, and citizen journalism **flourished**.

However, **corporate interests have adapted** quickly—using the same platforms to **reinforce division, monetize attention, and maintain control**.

Access alone is not enough. Understanding **how film media works** is **essential**.

Why Film Media Literacy Matters

Film Media Literacy Education does not teach people what to think.

It teaches **how meaning is constructed**, why images persuade, and how **narratives shape identity, behavior, and belief**.

At its core, media literacy builds:
• **Critical thinking**
• **Collaboration**
• **Communication**
• **Creative problem-solving**

These are the very skills **demanded** by today's workforce and required for a **healthy democracy**.

In countries across Europe, film media literacy is recognized as a **public good**.

Community-based media initiatives around the world— from New Orleans to India— demonstrate how storytelling can **rebuild civic trust**, generate **economic** opportunity, and strengthen **social cohesion**.

REBUILDING THE PUBLIC SQUARE

A CALL TO REIMAGINE DEMOCRACY

Media has always shaped public opinion. When used responsibly, it can also strengthen community.

Research has shown that embedding positive social messages into popular entertainment—such as public safety narratives—can measurably change behavior at scale.

This is not theoretical; it is **proven**.

Film Media Literacy allows communities to **circulate ideas**, **facts**, and **perspectives** in ways that help people **understand** how they fit into a **shared narrative**.

A Call to Reimagine Democracy

We do not **see with our eyes**—we see with our **brains**. What we are **taught**, what we **consume**, and what we **repeatedly witness** shapes how we **interpret reality**.

If American **democracy** is to endure, we must **move beyond** passive media consumption and toward active, informed participation.

That requires **education** that recognizes the **power of images** and **equips people**—especially youth—to use media **ethically**, **creatively**, and **collectively**.

A mind **stretched** by film media literacy education **never returns** to its former limits.

America must **reimagine** itself not as a collection of **divided identities**, but as a **connected community**—**capable** of telling its own stories, confronting its challenges, and **shaping its future together**.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Saunders is the Founder and CEO of People 4 People Productions
and a lifelong educator, filmmaker, and film media literacy advocate
dedicated to youth empowerment, democratic engagement,
and community storytelling.

She grew up in a neighborhood shaped by both the struggle and
the triumph of Black culture, civic activism, and community resilience.

Her neighborhood included icons of civil rights, sports, and the musical
creativity of Motown—powerful reminders of what it means when
everyday people take control of their narratives and demand a seat
at the decision-making table.

This upbringing shaped her belief that stories are not entertainment
alone —they are instruments of power, visibility, policy influence,
and cultural preservation.

As an African American woman in leadership, Jennifer brings
lived expertise into pogram P4PP builds. She understands how
generations of exclusion from media industries, arts pathways,
and emerging technologies have limited opportunities for
Black and Brown youth.

She recognizes that the issue is not a lack of talent, vision, or
creativity —it is a lack of access, mentorship, resources,
and platforms.

Jennifer's ability to bridge cultural, educational, technological, and
community spaces allow her to develop programs that resonate
deeply with youth and families.

She sees possibilities where others see deficits, and she designs systems
that invite participation rather than reinforce barriers.

Jennifer carries the generational understanding that narrative control
is a civil rights issue—and that youth must be equipped with
the tools, knowledge, and confidence to shape their own stories.

———————————