[This is an exercise aimed at helping to open up people’s eyes, minds and hearts to a range of representations of religion in media, and particularly to the challenges religious educators might face in engaging such representation. It is meant to open up questions, not provide answers.]

This video exercise usually requires from an hour to an hour and a half to complete, and can be used in a group as small as ten people, although it works very well in very large groups, too, as long as everyone can see the screen and hear what is going on.

For this exercise you will need seven, roughly three minute long video clips from broadcast television (more about that in a moment), a blackboard or white board or newsprint to write on in front of the group, and each participant will need a piece of paper and a writing instrument.

Begin by drawing a horizontal line on the chalkboard (or whiteboard, etc.), with the word “real” on the right hand end of the line. Make the line as long as you can, and ask students to replicate the drawing on their own piece of paper. Explain that this is a reality spectrum, that you are going to show them various short video clips, and that you are going to ask them to place each clip somewhere on that spectrum. Already at this point in the explanation I am usually interrupted by students who want to know what word to place on the opposite end, and what “real” means. I tell them that part of what we’ll be exploring in this exercise are responses to those questions. In the meantime, they should simply try to engage the exercise as it comes. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers, and students should always feel free to keep their responses private. Next, explain that you will be inviting a person to volunteer prior to each clip, and that once the particular clip has been shown, that volunteer will come up front and place the clip on the large spectrum in front. They may also share why they’ve placed it there, if they choose to do so.

Go ahead and show the clips in the order you’ve chosen in advance. Remember to invite a volunteer prior to showing the clip (so they don’t know what they’re about to see), and then remember to give them time to come up front and mark the clip on the spectrum. Most people will immediately recognize at least the genre of the clip you’re using, if not the precise show from which it’s drawn. It is useful to remind the group from time to time that they should be thinking about their own spectrum, not assuming that theirs should echo the one up front.

Once you’ve shown the clips, the first question to ask is usually “does anyone’s spectrum match the one up front?” In all of the years I’ve been doing this exercise, I’ve never once had anyone whose drawing did. A point to draw out here is that everyone
approaches media from their own location, and will make meaning with it in highly personal ways. One way to explore such meaning-making is to invite students to talk about the criteria they used in placing clips. This is usually a very fruitful question, and people do not hesitate to brainstorm about it. Write the criteria up on the board in front of the room, and do your best to be encouraging. If you don’t understand a particular response, you can always invite a student to elaborate on their idea by explaining how they used it to place clips.

If students’ responses do not include reflecting on the particular production elements of the videos, I will usually add those as criteria as well, pointing out that different genres carry meaning in different ways (soap operas have low production values and are produced on a budget, whereas prime time dramas have higher budgets, etc.; new media are framed in certain ways, and Saturday morning cartoons in others). Once all of the criteria have been written down, go through the list and see what kinds of themes emerge. In general this exercise usually elicits a lot of criteria based in some way on students’ experiences – “it feels true to me” “I’ve been in similar situations” “it didn’t feel real, I felt manipulated” -- and so on. I generally have to push to get at other possible criteria that could emerge, among them elements of genre, production, and so on. This exercise has been at the heart of my own shift over the years to recognizing the profoundly affective ways in which people make meaning in mediated contexts. As Thomas Boomershine has noted, we tend to reason more by means of sympathetic identification than philosophical argument in our current media climate. At the same time, however, such identification must needs be stretched – particularly in an environment where only certain experiences are embedded in mediated representations.

After talking about the criteria they are using, I then shift the discussion to the question of what is “real” and what term they had in their mind as the opposite end of the spectrum. Here the discussion can quickly become quite philosophical as students struggle to figure out what the relationship is between notions of “real” that mean “material reality” or “evidence,” and notions that have more the connotation of “truth” or “absolute ground of existence.” The opposite end of the spectrum might be “false” “unreal” “hyperreal” “surreal” and so on, but what qualifies under that term usually varies greatly from student to student. Is a particular clip more “real” or “true” because it has a bible verse embedded in it? Is it more real because it “feels” more real to me, or because it aligns more completely with a particular understanding of truth? Here again the conversation can go in multiple directions. I tend to work towards keeping the questions as open as possible, laying the groundwork for more discussion in later sections of my courses. This is not an exercise aimed at arriving at a common definition of reality, but rather one focused on problematizing the perceptions of reality that students have when they enter my class.

In my own teaching, the layer of “content” meaning I’ve tried to include in this exercise clusters around representations of religion and religious persons. All of the clips I use carry some element of religious representation in them, and that allows me to invite students to reflect on the “religious education” people receive within media culture before they ever walk in the door of a church or other faith community.
In this exercise, the choice of clips you use is important. I generally use seven clips, and draw them from a variety of genres. I use something from a soap opera, from a news magazine, from a PBS documentary, from a children’s show, from a cartoon, from a prime time drama, and then I usually also include a clip that is a broadcast of a religious service. Each clip is no longer than 3 minutes long, and has to have some internal consistency to it. That is, the clip I use from a drama is an entire scene, the exchange from a news magazine is at least one question asked and answered, and so on.

I gather these clips simply from regular television viewing (although lately YouTube, Hulu, and other online sources have proven very fruitful). Shows such as *The West Wing*, *Joan of Arcadia* and *The Simpsons* are usually very easy choices for grabbing clips with religious representation embedded in them. News magazine shows often run specials around the release of particular movies, so if there is a movie coming out with a religious theme (a much more frequent occurrence these days), then taping *20/20* or *Primetime* or *The Today Show* often yields useful materials. Evening newscasts frequently have religious stories on them on Sundays, or coming up to major religious holidays. I have not had as much luck with soap operas, although *One Life to Live* has a recurring character who is a priest, and has, at least in the past, produced some interesting and evocative story lines. *VeggieTales*, a popular animated children’s series is often the one exception to my rule of using only broadcast clips. The series is sold primarily via videotape and DVD, and not regularly broadcast, but it is generally always good for a brief and amusing clip, and is a good example for problematizing the embedding biblical text in video.

When I first encountered this video exercise, it was done around the representation of violence, and was very effective. I think you could also implement it using the representation of gender or race or class or ethnicity or age or any of a number of other cultural characteristics as the lens through which you choose clips. It is a remarkably flexible exercise for generating critical reflection along with enjoyable engagement. A final comment I would make about it is that I have found it a very useful evaluation tool when used at the beginning of a course. I often try it on the first day of my classes – that session when you can not assume our students have read any of the course materials yet – and it provides a way for me to draw them into collaboration right away. I learn a lot about who in the class likes this kind of exercise, and who does not, who can frame their experiences critically, and who is not yet able to do so, and so on. I also learn a lot about their attitudes toward popular culture, and their familiarity (or lack thereof) with media education.

Notes:

1. I have adapted this exercise from one I first encountered in the *Felton Media Literacy Scholars* seminar taught by Professor Renee Hobbs in Boston, MA. More information on Dr. Hobbs’ work is available at: http://www.reneehobbs.org/ (accessed on May 13, 2004)