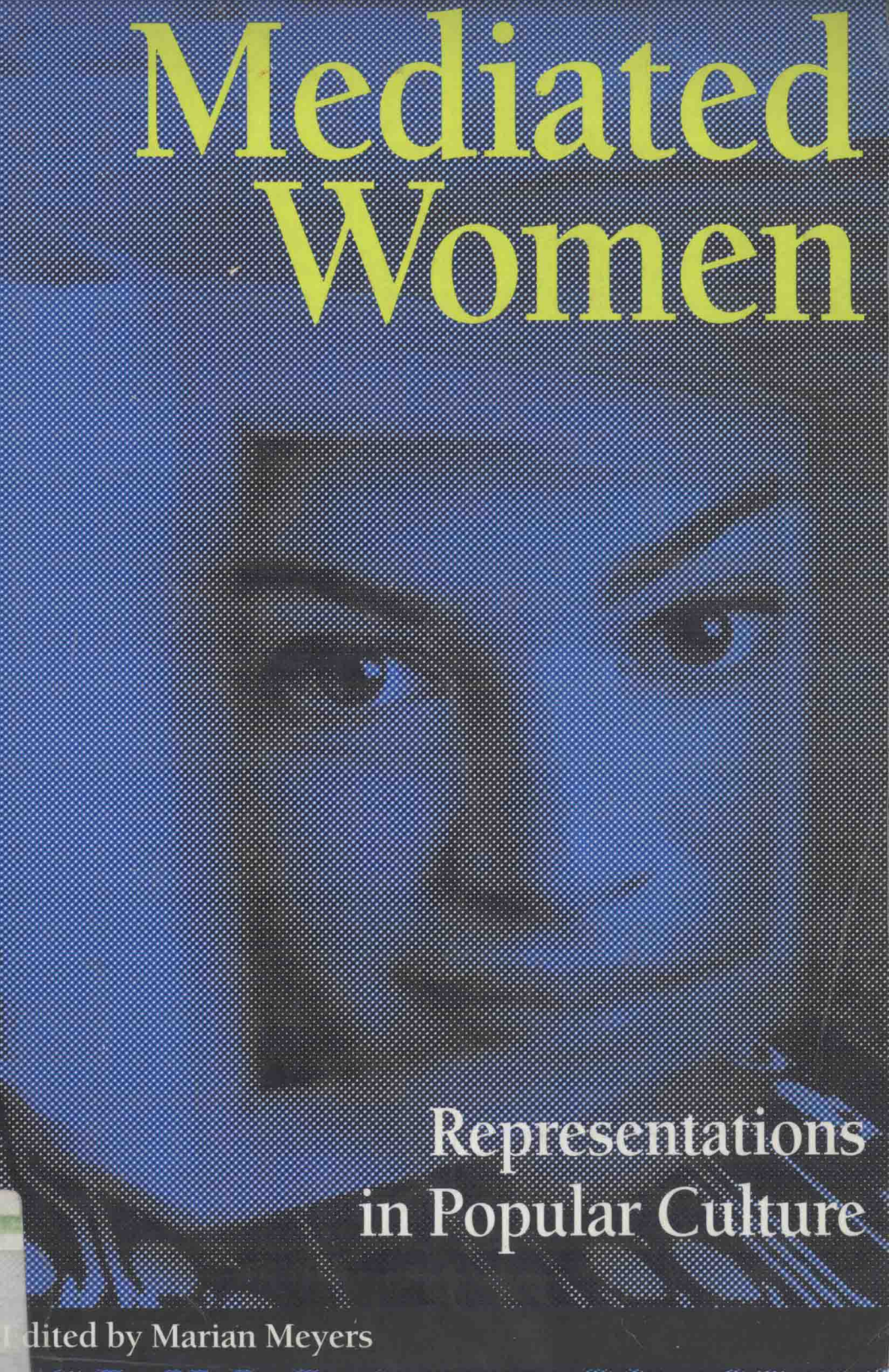
Mediated Women



Representations in Popular Culture

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INTRODUCTION

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Fracturing Women

Marian Meyers

> The bus stop posters advertising Fox television's *Melrose Place* featured a huge photo of star Heather Locklear with the words "Mondays are a bitch" scrawled across her face. Monday, according to Fox publicists, had been designated "Bitch Night" in honor of Locklear's character.
>
> The super-thin body of super-model Kate Moss has become a ubiquitous icon of beauty, her reed-like frame idealized in magazine fashion spreads as the perfect female form.
>
> The song "Smack My Bitch Up," from a hit album by the British group Prodigy, was released as a single on Madonna's Maverick label, along with 3,000 promotional posters that feature the title as a slogan for display in record stores. The music video created to promote the song showed women being hit and injected with drugs.

Should we care about these words and images? Do the representations of women in popular media affect us and the ways we view the world, or are they primarily fleeting in duration and inconsequential in impact? Considerable research indicates that the images *do* affect us, that they work, cumulatively and unconsciously, to create and reinforce a particular world view or ideology that shapes our perspectives and beliefs about the world, our neighborhoods, and ourselves. Research, for example, has linked the glamorization of thinness by models and actresses on television, in newspapers, and in magazines to potentially deadly eating

disorders such as bulimia and anorexia (Kilbourne, 1993, 1994; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994).

Of course, concern about the media's depiction of women is not new. Twenty years ago, in the first book to look broadly at the representation of women in mediated popular culture, Tuchman (1978) concluded that the mass media engaged in the "symbolic annihilation" of women through the condemnation, trivialization, and absence of them:

> Consider the symbolic representation of women in the mass media. Relatively few women are portrayed there, although women are fifty-one percent of the population and are well over forty percent of the labor force. Those working women who are portrayed are condemned. Others are trivialized: they are symbolized as child-like adornments who need to be protected or they are dismissed to the protective confines of the home. In sum, they are subject to *symbolic annihilation*. (p. 8; emphasis in original)

Much has changed since that book, *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media* (Tuchman, Daniels, & Benét, 1978), examined the portrayal of women in television, women's magazines, and newspapers in the late 1970s:

- MTV—which first took to the airwaves August 1, 1981—has altered permanently the visual terrain of television, not simply in its introduction of music videos as combination art form, entertainment, and advertisement, but also in pioneering production techniques that have become standard in other televisual genres.
- More women now work outside the home—and have increased their presence within the media industries—although they continue to earn lower wages than men, remain largely excluded from top management positions, and still do the bulk of the housework and child care at home (Rhode, 1997).
- Niche marketing has reached new heights of specialization, from the new WB and UPN television networks' focus on programming for young audiences to the growing number of new magazines targeting highly specialized consumer groups, from Mac computer users to women athletes and working mothers.
- The women's movement is now said to be in its Third Wave—the First Wave having occurred during the Suffrage Movement of the late 19th and early 20th century, and the Second during the 1960s and 1970s.

Despite the social, political, economic, and cultural upheavals during the 20 years since *Hearth and Home* was published, no book since has attempted to broadly assess the state of the image of women in the media. Writers have, of course, explored the meaning behind the mediated images of specific women such as Madonna (Frank & Smith, 1993; Schwichtenberg, 1993), or they have attempted to chronicle the popular media's representation of women within specific themes such as femininity (Macdonald, 1995), or particular genres such as advertising (Barthel, 1988; Goffman, 1979). But a book that closely examined a wide range of mediated texts for the portrayal of women in popular culture remained to be written.

Thus was born the idea for this book. Given that *Hearth and Home* was long out of print, as well as dated given the social and cultural transformations of the intervening years, an obvious question was whether the book's conclusions were similarly dated. Were the popular media still guilty of the symbolic annihilation of women? Or was something else going on?

Mediated Women: Representations in Popular Culture attempts to answer these questions with original research into the popular media's portrayal of women. Its goals are to provide a current look at the images of women, to examine their mediated representations as they appear at this historical point in time, and to demonstrate how media texts[1] promote particular understandings of women's lives and roles.

Of course, it would be impossible for any one book—or series—to adequately portray the vast array of mediated images of women. A quantitative approach could provide greater breadth by offering a summary of findings over a wider range of images. Indeed, such an approach is extremely useful in providing an overview of the representation of women as they appear in specific media programs or genres. The reports of the Women, Men and Media Project (1991, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996), for example, have effectively documented the presence—or, more accurately, the absence—of women within print and broadcast news, both as sources and journalists. After concluding that women more often than not were "window dressing" in the world of news (1994), the project more recently found that the number of women in the news was actually beginning to decline (1995, 1996). Similarly, Nancy Signorielli's (1997) quantitative content analysis across six media[2] used heavily by teenage girls showed that the media play a dual role by presenting both positive and negative images of women, thus providing adolescent girls with conflicting messages about their own potential. Although many of the female characters in Signorielli's study were strong, independent, intelligent, and honest, physical appearance and relationships were of primary concern for them. By way of contrast, her

analysis also found that jobs and careers were far more important for male characters. The overall message may be that girls and women can be strong, smart, and independent as long as they remain within the confines of their homes and relationships while also maintaining traditional standards of feminine beauty.

Although Signorielli's content analysis and others like it are of particular value in assessing the gains women have or have not made relative to a quantifiable standard, numbers by themselves do not tell the whole story. They do not, for instance, tell us how the representation of women's equality may be shaped by the media's primary allegiance to corporate interests (see Elayne Rapping's chapter on *Melrose Place*), or how media images collude with prevailing cultural notions of gender, race, and class to define and reinforce white, middle-class standards of feminine beauty and desirability (see Bettina Fabos's chapter on figure skating). Nor do they tell us how patriarchy may be reinscribed within the subtext of a television sitcom that *appears* to position its female lead as equal and authoritative (see Charlene Dellinger-Pate and Roger Aden's chapter on *Home Improvement*), or demonstrate how heterosexual anxiety and fear circumscribe the portrayal of the "acceptable" lesbian (see Amy Villarejo's chapter on the made-for-TV movie about a military officer discharged from service for being a lesbian), or show us how depictions of women of color may be made to resist racialized stereotyping (see chapters by Lisa Flores and Michelle Holling, Anjali Ram, and Meta Carstarphen). Quantitative studies cannot address nuance and underlying meanings as can qualitative, textual analyses.

This book, then, attempts to understand the meanings behind the representations of women in popular culture through primarily qualitative textual analyses[3] of films, television programs, the news, magazines, music videos, and advertising.[4] Although the term *popular culture* can be applied to such activities as shopping and going to the beach on a hot summer day, *mediated* popular culture refers to the mass produced commodities—television sitcoms and dramas, movies, books, newspapers, music CDS, and so on—created and disseminated by the media for wide consumption by various targeted segments of the population. Therefore, the crucial issues to be explored in this book are: what mediated popular culture says about women and their roles in contemporary society, whether and how the mediated representation of women addresses real women's goals and potential, how the popular media negotiate the tension between cultural constraint and social change within their portrayals of women, and whether women are still the victims of symbolic annihilation by the media.

This chapter situates the rest of this book within the broader context of research into the mediated representation of woman. It also

addresses the role of the media in maintaining and, at times, challenging a patriarchal world view, and it argues that the representations of women in mediated popular culture are fractured, reflecting multiple and often contradictory images, so that "symbolic annihilation" may no longer be an appropriate term for describing the mass media's treatment and depiction of women. Finally, this chapter provides an overview of the rest of the book and its organization.

CREATING CONSENT

Culture is inherently political, for it is the process by which meanings of self, of social identity and social relations, are created within the context of a particular system of hierarchical social formations. In the case of U.S. and other Eurocentric cultures, that system is, as John Fiske (1989) states, "white, patriarchal capitalism" (p. 1). And the resources or products of popular culture within this capitalist formation "carry the interests of the ideologically dominant; they have lines of force within them that are hegemonic and that work in favor of the status quo" (p. 2).

Other cultural critics have also pointed out that the popular media help to shape a world view in their audiences which supports those in positions of power and authority (Althusser, 1971; Gitlin, 1980; Hall, 1982). By serving the interests of this ruling class, the popular media help to maintain its political, economic, and social dominance. Of course, patriarchy cannot do its job of supporting the status quo alone. It also must embrace and promote particular understandings of race, class, and sexuality—along with traditional gender stereotypes and beliefs—if the ideals, values, and opinions of white, heterosexual, middle- and upper class men are to remain the dominant ideology within society. Indeed, this prevailing ideology must appear natural, inevitable, commonsensical, and *consensual* to be effective.

The popular media play a key role in maintaining hegemonic consensus by helping those in power win the consent of the governed (Gramsci, 1971, 1983). Subordinated groups—women, people of color, the poor and working classes, lesbians and gay men, the elderly—are encouraged to "buy into" the dominant ideology which, in fact, maintains the status quo by keeping them subordinated. Thus, the ideological work of the media consists, in part, of presenting a reality[5] that appears more natural or real than the material circumstances of subordinated people's lives—even when those circumstances would appear to contradict the media's messages. Research conducted by Elizabeth Frazer (1987) illustrates the media's role in this process. In a study of how adolescent females "read" *Jackie*, a British teen magazine for girls, she found that

when the media's version of reality conflicted with the girls' lived reality, the media's account was viewed as more credible and legitimate. Liesbet van Zoonen (1994) sums up the various studies in this area as follows:

> in research on stereotypes it is thought that children and adults learn their appropriate gender roles by a process of symbolic reinforcement and correction. . . . In research on ideology a process of familiarization with dominant ideology is assumed leading finally to its internalization and transformation into common sense. (p. 29)

Although media texts—that is, mediated cultural commodities—are molded by and are a product of the dominant ideology, their messages remain polysemic, open to various interpretations. Thus, although the "preferred reading" (Hall, 1980) of the text may be inscribed by and reflective of the dominant ideology, individuals may vary widely in their interpretation of the same text, depending on their backgrounds and who they are. Gender, race, class, ethnic background, age, and other signifiers of domination and exclusion, along with personal experience, become factors in determining how an individual subjectively creates meaning from and interprets or "decodes" a text (Morley, 1980). Celeste Condit (1989) has argued that this process may actually be more a function of "polyvalence" in which audience members may receive similar meanings from mediated messages but *evaluate* them differently, depending, again, on their individual decoding capabilities. Regardless of whether audience members construct meaning from or evaluate messages differently, what is clear is that individuals do different things with texts and come to different conclusions based on their individual experiences and background. For example, a moviegoer's decoding strategies and abilities will determine whether she or he finds pleasure in a pornographic film or is outraged by its degrading depiction of women. And although similarities in background and experience among a particular subcultural grouping such as white, middle-class, college-educated, young women may lead most members to interpret or read a text similarly, even within this seemingly homogenous subcultural formation, some variety and deviation is inevitable.

However, resistance to the dominant ideology is not limited to the subjectivity and decoding capabilities of the individual reader of cultural texts. It also exists within the texts themselves,[6] for they are fraught with the contradictions reflective of competing interest groups. Hegemony is never a given, but must be fought for, renewed, recreated, and defended on a continuous basis if it is to maintain its position of dominance. This struggle pits competing versions of reality against each other, with the prevailing ideology able to accommodate and incorpo-