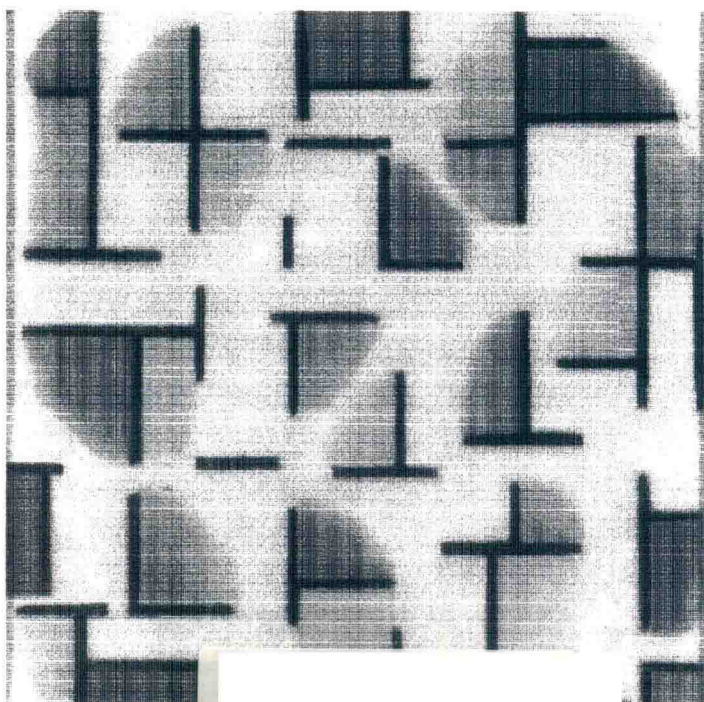


Liesbet van Zoonen

Feminist Media Studies



院图书馆



FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES

Liesbet van Zoonen



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

© Liesbet van Zoonen 1994

First published 1994

Reprinted 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011 (twice), 2012

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.



SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/1 1, Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-8039-8553-7

ISBN 978-0-8039-8554-4 (pbk)

Library of Congress Control Number: 94065541

Typeset by Photoprint Ltd., Torquay, Devon

Printed in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group



FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES

The Media, Culture & Society Series

Editors: John Corner, Nicholas Garnham, Paddy Scannell, Philip Schlesinger, Colin Sparks, Nancy Wood

The Economics of Television

The UK Case

Richard Collins, Nicholas Garnham and Gareth Locksley

Media, Culture and Society

A Critical Reader

edited by

Richard Collins, James Curran, Nicholas Garnham, Paddy Scannell,
Philip Schlesinger and Colin Sparks

Capitalism and Communication

Global Culture and the Economics of Information

Nicholas Garnham, edited by Fred Inglis

Media, State and Nation

Political Violence and Collective Identities

Philip Schlesinger

Broadcast Talk

edited by

Paddy Scannell

Journalism and Popular Culture

edited by

Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks

Media, Crisis and Democracy

edited by

Marc Raboy and Bernard Dagenais

Culture and Power

A Media, Culture & Society Reader

edited by

Paddy Scannell, Philip Schlesinger and Colin Sparks

Interpreting Audiences

The Ethnography of Media Consumption

Shaun Moores

Acknowledgements

This book is a product of discussions with colleagues, questions from students, readings of literature, suggestions from friends, debates within the women's movement, meetings at conferences and a whole range of other factors. I have appreciated these exchanges tremendously even if it has now become impossible to trace how each of them added to this book. However, there are a few people I would like to mention explicitly for their contribution to my understanding of feminist media studies and to this book in particular. I would like to thank Ien Ang who directed my attention to poststructuralist theory and whose relentless critical spirit provides a stimulating intellectual example. The encouragement of Colin Sparks for this book and for earlier projects has always been a source of support and is also something to look forward to in the future. Being close friends with Joke Hermes for some ten years now, both at work and in private, has greatly enhanced my pleasure in academic life and has helped me through the numerous frustrations of academia. My work wouldn't be the same without her.

To Jaap

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
1 Introduction	1
Encoding/decoding	8
2 'New' Themes	11
Feminist critiques on communication studies	14
Feminist themes in communication studies	16
Feminist contributions to a new paradigm?	27
3 A 'New' Paradigm?	29
Distortion	30
Socialization	34
Communication as ritual	36
Cultural studies	40
4 Media Production and the Encoding of Gender	43
Production, encoding and negotiation: <i>Cagney and Lacey</i>	43
Studies of media production	46
The gendered structure of media production	49
Encoding	62
5 Media Texts and Gender	66
Symbols of reality: content analysis	68
Symbols for reality: semiotics	74
6 Spectatorship and the Gaze	87
Men looking at women	88
Women looking at women	93
Women looking at men	97
7 Gender and Media Reception	105
Reading the romance	108
Television and the family	113
Women and soap operas	117
Technologies of gender?	122

8 Research Methods	127
Feminist methods	128
Interpretative research strategies	130
Quality control	144
9 Conclusion	148
References	156
Index	168

Introduction

During the time I was working on this book, a Dutch radio journalist called me one day to invite me to take part in a round table discussion on Madonna. Her CD and book *Erotica* had just come out and had incited considerable uproar in the Dutch media, as it did elsewhere. I told the reporter I was a great admirer of Madonna and that I would happily take part. This was not at all what he had in mind. He had been hoping for 'a feminist who would object to Madonna's exploitation of her body and to her ventures into pornography'. The feminist he had in mind would have to confront other cultural critics with a more favourable outlook on Madonna. As I did not want to take up this preordained position, I had to disappoint him. To the dismay of the reporter, most other Dutch feminist cultural critics had done so too and the reporter complained that he could not find one feminist to criticize Madonna. The discussion was eventually cancelled.

Something similar happened to a student of mine who was invited to a TV show to talk about her MA thesis on the increased usage of male nudes in mainstream advertisements and commercials. Apparently, the TV-producers expected a story on the reversal of gender roles in popular culture with men now taking on the formerly female role of pin-ups as a sign of emerging equality. When my student argued that her evidence did not quite point in that direction, the item and her contribution were dismissed for being 'overly subtle and not outspoken enough'.¹

One encounters correspondingly limited expectations of feminist cultural and media critique in discussions with students and colleagues. According to their logics, a feminist viewpoint on the media implies a univocal, confident and unswerving denunciation of popular culture, both for its sexist and oppressive portrayal of women and for the devastating effects it is supposed to have on women and men. Students, colleagues and journalists alike will then argue against such a position claiming that feminism draws a narrow picture of media and cultural practice, although – as the above examples show – this narrow point is exactly the one most journalists want you to make. To make matters more complicated, it is not only non-feminists that construct feminist cultural critique as rigid and austere. Within the women's movement itself, wholesale and merciless condemnations of media output are commonplace too (for example, Davies et al., 1987).

As a feminist media critic one is commuting between the different

realities, requirements and interests of the women's movement, journalism and – in my privileged case – the academic world, partly to find and fight the same kinds of circumscribed interpretations of feminist media critique everywhere. Apparently, a straightforward, univocal and identifiable feminist voice is what many feminist and non-feminists alike are looking for, possibly hoping for some sense and direction in the complicated and sometimes bewildering issues that make up contemporary debates on the media.

Although this book does intend to create some order in thinking about feminism and mass media and although I shall argue from a distinct position in this field, I neither aspire to reprobate (or celebrate) popular culture, nor do I intend to offer anything like correct approaches, closing arguments and final answers. On the contrary, the book is meant to provide insight into the enormous heterogeneity of feminist media theory and media research that has been produced in the past decades. As such the book will, I hope, serve the needs of researchers, teachers and students both in women's studies and media or communication departments. However, apart from the desire to describe and explain the diversity in feminist media theory and research, a less modest and possibly more debatable objective of the book is to advance the field by using a cultural studies framework to appraise and integrate feminist research on the distinctive elements of the mass communication process. Disagreement may arise over the particular interpretation of cultural studies adopted in this book and more fundamentally over the issue whether a cultural studies framework really has the potential to advance the field, not only academically and intellectually but also politically, for the feminist academic project is intrinsically political.

With its substantial project, it is the reciprocal relation between theory, politics and activism, the commitment of feminist academics to have their work contribute to a larger feminist goal – however defined, the blurred line between the feminist as academic and the feminist as activist, that distinguishes feminist perspectives on the media from other possible perspectives. (van Zoonen, 1991a: 34)

Therefore, the book should also be useful for the numerous pressure groups working towards a more varied portrayal of women and sexual minorities in the media.

In order to facilitate an evaluation of the theoretical and political objectives of the book I shall begin with outlining my position in the two fields that inform this book, feminism and cultural studies.

Feminism

Feminism nowadays is not easily delineated or defined. As a political project – at least in the context of continental western Europe – for the greater part its character has moved from a highly visible, vital and sometimes spectacular countercultural form to a customary but at times

still controversial component of established institutions such as political parties, unions, universities and local and national administrations. Much contemporary feminism has taken on the form of women's caucuses, women's studies and women's bureaux which often prefer to speak of their activities as 'emancipatory' instead of 'feminist'. A similar reluctance to associate with 'feminism' seems to occur among women in their twenties who feel that feminism was a battle of their mothers or older sisters and claim that their own struggles are of a different kind. Andrea Stuart (1990), for instance, argues that women of her generation do want change but don't want to be associated with a presumably outdated and rigid lifestyle. For many black women and women from developing countries, 'feminism' for much longer tended to represent a discourse that seemed neither very sensitive nor very relevant to their concerns, given its initial white, first world and sometimes neocolonial biases (hooks, 1989; Wallace, 1975). Such controversies have generated the insight that 'women' cannot be considered a unified constituency and the challenge for feminism to build a politics that acknowledges, respects and accommodates difference.

The political fragmentation of feminism has been both a cause and a consequence of multitudinous developments in feminist theory. In the past twenty years, 'the founding principles of contemporary western feminism have been dramatically challenged, with previously shared assumptions and unquestioned orthodoxies relegated almost to history', according to Michèle Barrett and Anne Philips (1992). They claim that feminism used to be united in the quest for the *cause* of women's oppression, which was generally assumed to lie at the level of the social structure, whether this structure was conceived as capitalism, patriarchy or sexist society. Socialist, radical and liberal feminism respectively withstood each other as to the crucial source of women's oppression, but shared their assumption of a determining last instance. Black feminism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and postmodernism, and the revaluation by some feminists of traditional 'womanly' conceptions of morality and care, all undermined suchlike structuralist analyses of women's oppression in pointing out their ethnocentric proclivity, their untempered belief in rationality and progress and their 'Enlightenment' conception of a universal, unified human subject.

Whereas this fragmentation makes it impossible to think of 'feminist' theory as a consistent and homogeneous field, there are still some common concepts that distinguish feminism from other perspectives in the social sciences and the humanities. Its unconditional focus on analysing *gender* as a mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them, is hard to find in other perspectives on humanity and society. This is not to say that such a focus will always result in the conclusion that gender is *the* defining factor in human relations and society. Ethnicity, sexuality, class and a range of other discourses intersect with gender in various and sometimes contradictory ways, to the extent that

poststructuralist feminist thinkers will argue that gender need not even be a defining factor in some human experiences:

There is no reason why sexual difference should be pertinent in all social relations. To be sure, today many different practices, discourses and institutions do construct men and women [differentially], and the masculine/feminine distinction exists as a pertinent one in many fields. But this does not imply that it should remain the case, and we can perfectly imagine sexual difference becoming irrelevant in many social relations where it is currently found. (Mouffe, 1992: 377)

Along with gender, *power* is another key element of feminist thought, although also conceptualized in widely diverging ways: as a non-issue, for instance, when it is emphasized that women are a disadvantaged, minority group that needs equal opportunities and rights much more than power; or as something individual actors possess, when the power of men (or groups of men) over women is reproved; as an offspring of material conditions, when the economic power relations of capitalism are seen as the cause of women's oppression. Others, however, most notably poststructuralist feminist thinkers argue that power is not a monolithic 'thing' that some groups (men, capitalists, whites) have and others (women, working class, blacks) have not. Society is not constituted by orderly and dichotomous divisions of oppressors and oppressed. As the experience of black feminists has made perfectly clear, one can be subordinated in one relation (of woman vs man) and dominant in another (of white woman vs black woman). The issue for feminism therefore, is not who is 'in power' and who is not, for this will inevitably lead to a rather cynical contest of who is 'most oppressed in contemporary society'. Rather, the challenge is to 'theorize the multiplicity of relations of subordination' (Mouffe, 1992: 372) and to analyse how in these relations of subordination individual and collective identities, such as gender and ethnicity, are being constituted.

Gender and power then, although both very much in debate, form the constituents of feminist theory. The discussions that I referred to only briefly and abstractly now will be taken up in more detail in the next two chapters, resulting in an understanding of gender and power that conceives of gender as 'a particular discourse, that is, a set of overlapping and often contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions referring to sexual difference which arises from and regulates particular economic, social, political, technological and other non-discursive contexts' (Chapter 3, p. 33). The influence of poststructuralism is salient here, although I only hesitantly want to use such a label for my own work. Hesitantly because of all the dispute around the meaning of poststructuralism and its twin sisters postmodernism and deconstruction resulting in widely different and contradictory interpretations (for example, Nicholson, 1990). Hesitantly, because I would not know exactly how and where to position myself in such an 'unruly field' as Judith Butler (1992: 6) has called it, nor have I a desire to do so. Such labels are more often requested by and imposed on one by

others – in another instance of a search for stable and recognizable identities – than happily taken on for oneself.

Cultural Studies

Judging from recent international best-seller lists, culture and representation have once again become important battle grounds for feminism. Naomi Wolff's (1990) *The Beauty Myth*, concerned with the onerous cultural messages about women's appearances and bodies, Susan Faludi's (1991) *Backlash* on the return of conservatism and anti-feminism in American media, and Camille Paglia's (1990) rancorous *Sexual Persona*, besmirching the women's movement, testify – with other publications – of the cultural struggles going on in contemporary first world societies on the nature of femininity, masculinity and feminism; what does it mean to be a woman or a man, how are feminine and masculine subjectivities and identities constructed, individually as women and men, and collectively as 'Woman' or as 'Man'; is one either woman or man or can one be both; which interests are being served by particular constructions? Such struggles at present seem to be engaged in by feminists, intellectuals, politicians, artists and 'ordinary' women and men, since they are not only fought in the symbolic realm of the mass media and the arts, but also in that area of human existence which is characterized by routine, inconspicuous and ordinary activities, thoughts and feelings – everyday life. They can take on a variety of forms ranging from spectacle and marvel, irony and satire to downright vicious attacks, either in discursive or in physical form, on women (and some – mainly homosexual – men) who dare to transgress the boundaries of gender as defined by their adversaries. The astonishing and often exasperating publicity surrounding the American lawyer Hillary Rodham Clinton, married to the American president Bill Clinton, epitomizes these struggles just as do the controversies on other highly visible women such as Margaret Thatcher or Madonna. On a more mundane and imponderable level too gender is ceaselessly being contested, both by women (and again some men) deliberately and joyfully undermining prevailing definitions of gender and by those yearning to maintain the old and predictable dichotomies.

It is therefore hardly surprising that 'culture' has gained new importance on the feminist political and academic agenda. Michèle Barrett (1992: 204) has observed a growing interest of feminists in culture which she defines as the processes of symbolization and representation. Apprehending these processes would possibly generate a better understanding of 'subjectivity, the psyche and the self'. According to bell hooks (1990: 31), the engagement with culture enables feminists to do 'intellectual work that connects with habits of being, forms of artistic expression, and aesthetics that inform the daily life of writers and scholars as well as a mass population'.² Sara Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey also claim an

increasing importance of cultural issues for feminism, but use a much wider notion of culture:

The power relations of pornography, abortion, male violence, technology and science have increasingly come to be seen not only in terms of social institutions and practices, but also in terms of symbolic meanings, the formation of identities and deeply-rooted belief systems. (1991: 11)

As the slightly different emphases of these authors suggest, to say that this book is aimed at developing a *cultural* understanding of the relation between gender, power and mass media still needs clarification. 'Culture' is probably one of the most widely used concepts in the humanities and the social sciences. A conceptualization of culture as having to do with ways of life, is what I will be referring to in this book. To be more precise, 'culture' concerns 'the conditions and the forms in which meaning and value are structured and articulated within a society' (Corner, 1991: 131). These processes take place in institutionalized forms where the production and reception of mass mediated meanings are concerned and in everyday life when it concerns the daily symbolic interactions between human beings, within and between subcultures and other collectivities. Inevitably, gender is a, if not the, crucial component of culture.

Although it would be hard to identify a coherent theoretical and empirical programme to which a majority of feminist communication scholars would adhere, it does seem justified to say that cultural studies approaches have become somewhat dominant in the field. Cultural studies nowadays appears in many different disguises (Grossberg et al., 1992) that share among other things a concern with manifestations of popular culture and issues of representation and collective identities, such as national, ethnic and gender identities. Like feminist or women's studies, cultural studies, having grown out of Marxist theory and left politics, is linked to progressive political movements and concerns outside the academic world. Both have had the ambition to produce a cultural critique that contributes to a better understanding of relations of power and exclusion which may even turn out to be inspirational to undermine them. However deeply although uneasily involved in poststructuralism and postmodernism, feminist and cultural studies alike have abandoned the unmitigated belief in the relevance and potentiality of academic knowledge to feminist and other progressive political projects, leading to a renewed discussion as to what the relation between the two domains could be. In feminist media studies this debate has focused for an important part on the 'politics of pleasure', in particular on the meaning of popular genres like soap opera and melodrama, women's and gossip magazines or romances for the emancipation or liberation of women. As Ien Ang (1985: 118) in her study of *Dallas* succinctly summarizes: 'Is *Dallas* good or bad for women?' In addition to that Ang raises the question whether studying *Dallas* is good or bad for women? Paradoxically, it seems that the growing theoretical and empirical

sophistication of feminist studies on, for instance, soap operas has not only jeopardized its relevance for a critical feminist media politics but also diminished its potential as a comprehensive cultural critique. 'For example, as we acknowledge the pleasure women derive from watching soap operas it becomes increasingly difficult to find moral justifications for criticizing their contribution to the hegemonic construction of gender identities' (van Zoonen, 1991a: 35). The uneasy connection between the pleasures of popular culture and the political aims of feminism is by now more or less a classic issue in feminist media theory, emerging from the particular conjunction between cultural and feminist studies.

Notwithstanding the successful and inspiring alliance between feminist and cultural studies, not all feminist studies are cultural studies and not all cultural studies are feminist studies (cf. Franklin et al., 1991). For instance, with some exceptions (d'Acci, 1987), the area of media production has been largely neglected by feminist communication scholars working within a cultural studies paradigm. That sector is well covered by other researchers aiming at producing labour statistics that can inform emancipatory policy measures, the assumption usually being that masculine discourse in media texts can be attributed to the quantitative and qualitative dominance of men in media production. For instance, in the context of journalism, where the problem has been raised often, many feminist communication scholars have claimed that an increase in the number of female journalists would result in a more balanced and less sexist way of reporting. The relation between male dominance among media professionals and masculine discourse in media texts is another enduring issue in feminist media theory, although one that could benefit from a more theoretical approach *per se*, and as I shall elaborate in Chapter 4, from a cultural studies input in particular (cf. van Zoonen, 1988).

Looking at some other perennial themes and issues in feminist media theory and research taken up within and outside a cultural studies paradigm, for example pornography, advertising, the male and the female gaze, effects of media on gender identities, the relation between feminist media critic and female audiences – one sees the challenge to review all this material while at the same time anchoring it satisfactorily in a coherent analytical framework. Being partly an overview of existing research, intending a breadth of coverage, the book will to some extent have an inevitable collage-like quality, moving for example from a discussion of feminist journalists' working experiences in Chapter 4, to psychoanalytical film theory in Chapter 6 and to television audience research in Chapter 7. As said, however, a second purpose of the book is to apply a cultural studies framework to appraise and integrate feminist research on the distinctive elements of the mass communication. Whereas this perspective will be developed fully in Chapters 2 and 3, in order to understand the structure of the book it is necessary first to allude to some central concepts, in particular the 'encoding' and 'decoding' of meaning in media texts (Hall, 1973).

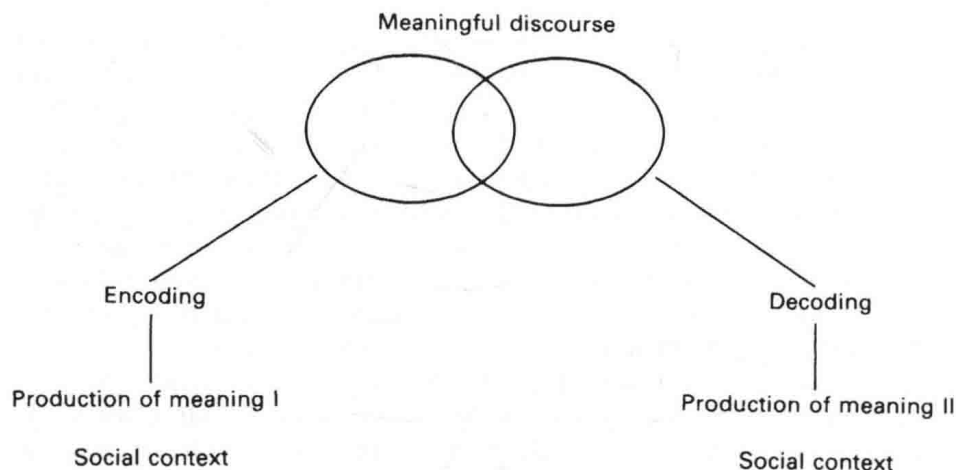


Figure 1.1 Hall's encoding/decoding model

Encoding/decoding

A slightly modified version of Stuart Hall's 'Encoding/Decoding' model (see Figure 1.1) serves as a framework to order the different subjects and themes covered by feminist media theory and research. The central problematic of the model involves the construction of meaning in media discourse which is presupposed to take place at different 'moments' in the process. In institutionalized processes of media production meaning is 'encoded' in discursive forms that do not constitute a closed ideological system but in which the contradictions of the production process are enclosed. The thus encoded structure of meaning serves in another 'moment' of meaning production, the decoding practices of audiences. Encoding and decoding need not be symmetrical, that is, audiences do not need to produce meaning similar to that produced by the media institution. In fact, a certain 'misunderstanding' is likely, because of 'the a-symmetry between the codes of "source" and "receiver" at the moment of transformation in and out of the discursive form. What are called "distortions" or "misunderstandings" arise precisely from the *lack of equivalence* between the two sides of production' (Hall, 1973: 131, *italics in original*).

A crucial feature of the 'encoding/decoding' model is that media discourse is supposed to be produced by media institutions and audiences at the same time, not as an activity of single institutions or individuals but as a social process embedded in existing power and discursive formations. Gledhill (1988) identifies this process as 'cultural negotiation' which takes place at the level of media institutions, texts and audiences. Institutional negotiation results from conflicting frames of reference within media organizations, for instance between 'creative' personnel guided mainly by professional and aesthetic logic and managing directors having commercial interests in mind. Negotiations at the level of the texts concern the different meanings available in a text as a result of the contradictions in