

S M E G

gender and the media



IRONY MEANS
NEVER HAVING TO
SAY YOU'RE SORRY

QUEERCHIC

REPORTING SEXUAL
VIOLENCE

THESEXUALISATION
OF CULTURE

BACKLASH
AND RETROSEXISM
THE EROTICISATION
OF MALE BODIES

POSTMODERNISM AND
POSTCOLONIALISM

CHIC LITIAS
POSTFEMINIST
ROMANCE

THE FEMINISATION OF THE PRESS

FROM OBJECTIFICATION
TO SUBJECTIFICATION

REVENGE ADVERTS



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Gender and the Media

Rosalind Gill

polity

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Gender and the Media

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Introduction

THIS is a book about the representation of gender in the media in contemporary Western societies. It is written against the backdrop of phenomenally rapid change: changes in gender relations; transformations in media technologies, regulatory frameworks, content, ownership and control, and globalization; and theoretical 'revolutions' in the approaches used to make sense of gender representations. *Gender and the Media* aims to freeze the frame, press the pause button, or hit the refresh key to explore how the media today construct femininity, masculinity and gender relations, and to think about the kinds of theoretical concepts and cultural politics that might be needed to engage with these changes.

The book is born out of an interest in the extraordinary contradictoriness of constructions of gender in today's media: confident expressions of 'girl power' sit alongside reports of 'epidemic' levels of anorexia and body dysmorphia; graphic tabloid reports of rape are placed cheek by jowl with adverts for lap-dancing clubs and telephone sex lines; lad magazines declare the 'sex war' over, while reinstating beauty contests and championing new, ironic modes of sexism; and there are regular moral panics about the impact on men of the new, idealized male body imagery, while the re-sexualization of women's bodies in public space goes virtually unremarked upon. Everywhere, it seems, feminist ideas have become a kind of common sense, yet feminism has never been more bitterly repudiated.

Some commentators see in this evidence of a powerful backlash against feminism (Faludi 1992). Germaine Greer (1999), for instance, argues that today's popular culture is significantly less feminist than that of thirty years ago, and Imelda Whelehan suggests that we have entered an era of 'retro-sexism' in which representations of women, 'from the banal to the downright offensive' are being 'defensively reinvented against cultural changes in women's lives' (2000: 11). By contrast, others regard the media as increasingly influenced by feminism, or, indeed, as becoming feminist. David Gauntlett argues 'the traditional view of a woman as a housewife or low status worker has

been kick-boxed out of the picture by the feisty, successful “girl power” icons’ (2002: 247). The media, he argues, offer popular feminism which is like ‘a radio-friendly remix of a multilayered song, with the most exciting bits sampled and some of the dense stuff left out’ (2002: 252). Meanwhile, Angela McRobbie points to the ‘enormous energy in the way in which sexual politics now bursts across our television screens . . . From Newsnight to Oprah . . . [F]emale independence has entered into contemporary common sense’ (1999: 126).

It seems to me that both these arguments are true. On the one hand feminist ideas are increasingly taken for granted across a range of media and genres, vibrant girlzines spring up all over the world, and the Web is home to an enormous diversity of feminist ideas ranging from support over breast cancer to ‘babes against the bomb’. But on the other, boring and predictable patterns of sexism persist – such as the continued invisibility of older women on television, or the depressingly narrow range of depictions of black women – and newer representational practices are often far from hopeful – for example, the rise of ‘porno chic’, the growth of unabashed ‘laddism’, and the vitriolic attacks in press and magazines on women who fail to live up to increasingly narrow normative requirements of feminine appearance. It is precisely the contradictoriness of contemporary representations of gender in the media that makes the field so difficult and challenging.

Added to this picture of paradox and complexity, there is another issue: like the media, gender relations and feminist ideas are themselves changing and in flux. There is no stable, unchanging feminist perspective from which to make a cool appraisal of contemporary gender in the media. Rather, feminist ideas are constantly transforming in response to different critiques, to new or previously excluded constituencies, to younger generations, to new theoretical ideas, and to the experience of various kinds of struggle. There is no single feminism, but instead many, diverse feminisms. If media representations of gender have changed, then so too have the feminist ideas used to understand and critique them. And, likewise, gender relations are constantly changing. Indeed, we are often told that Western democracies are experiencing nothing short of a ‘genderquake’, so profound are the current transformations.

Gender and the Media is an attempt to make sense of this picture of flux and transformation. The book has three main aims. First, it seeks to provide an analysis of the contemporary representations of gender in the media in Western societies, in all their messy contradictoriness. Its particular focus is upon how media constructions of gender have changed in recent years in response to feminist critiques and wider social transformations, and, to that end, it looks in detail at five types of media where different kinds of change can be seen very clearly: news,

advertising, talk shows, magazines and contemporary screen and paperback romances. In relation to each it is concerned not only with the representation of women, but also with constructions of masculinity, and how contemporary gender relations are depicted. How should we make sense of the increasing presence of eroticized images of the male body across the media landscape? What are we to make of the shift from discourses of romance to those of sex and celebrity in young women's magazines? Are talk shows like *Oprah* and *Ricki* redrawing the boundaries between the public and the private? What impact, if any, has the increasing number of female journalists had on 'news'? What kinds of constructions of heterosexual relationships are to be found in 'chick lit' and 'lad lit' and how different are these from traditional romances? These are just some of the questions asked.

Secondly, this book is concerned with the theoretical tools available for analysing media representations. It aims to interrogate some of the key terms that have been used to study gender in media texts, since scholars and activists first engaged with media representations of gender. *Gender and the Media* both acknowledges its debt to the vibrant and heterogeneous feminist media scholarship since the 1970s, and also seeks to question the relevance of some central concepts to critique in today's mediated world. For example, how useful is the notion of 'objectification' in a mediascape in which far from being presented as passive objects women are increasingly depicted as active, desiring sexual subjects? What does it mean to talk about the 'feminization' of an area (e.g. news)? Are the notions of 'backlash', 'retro-sexism' and 'postfeminism' helpful for making sense of contemporary media representations? How should the pervasive irony and playfulness of today's media be understood?

Thirdly, *Gender and the Media* is interested in cultural politics. It seeks to raise questions about what forms of political or cultural intervention are appropriate and effective to challenge particular constructions of gender, in a postmodern age in which critiques are routinely reflexively incorporated into media products and in which much sexism comes in an ironic guise which rebuffs easy protest: 'that is not a sexist image', we are told, 'it is a hilarious, knowing send-up of an old-fashioned "dumb blonde" stereotypes'! Whilst an earlier generation of feminist media activists put stickers or daubed graffiti on advertising images deemed to insult or trivialize women, today, as often as not, advertisers already orientate to potential critique within the adverts themselves – whether from feminists or simply from media-savvy and 'sign fatigued' consumers, weary of the relentless bombardment by consumer images. How, in this context, might people concerned or angry about media representations of men or women, lesbians or gays, mount an effective political critique? What kind of feminist cultural

politics is appropriate for the new media age? I cannot claim exhaustively to answer these questions here, but by providing an analysis of contemporary media representations and pointing to some of the new ways in which gender is figured I hope to draw attention to the ways in which older critical languages may fail to engage with gender in the media today, and to point to spaces where a new cultural politics might be developed.

These three themes – constructions of gender, the theoretical tools for analysing gender in the media, and feminist cultural politics – are what animate this book. Above all, the book deals with what is new and distinctive about representations of gender today compared with earlier eras, what concepts are needed for making sense of this, and what kinds of cultural intervention might constitute effective engagements in the contemporary media landscape.

The book opens with a review of the central themes and concerns of research about gender and the media. Chapter 1 charts different theoretical and political investments in feminist studies of media texts, and examines the turn to audience studies. Although this book is limited to examining constructions of gender in the media, and does not report on audience research, the notion that texts are polysemic and can be interpreted in multiple ways is central to the analyses presented here. The implications of the shift away from textual determinism or hypodermic conceptions of meaning cannot be overestimated. The chapter also discusses how feminist perspectives have changed as a consequence of critiques by black and Third World women, and the impact of post-structuralism and postmodernism. The final part of the chapter considers some of the central debates about the representation of gender in the media.

The second chapter is more methodological in focus and examines the key approaches that have been used to analyse gender in media texts, for example content analysis, semiotics and discourse analysis, discussing their strengths and weaknesses. It also introduces ideas from postmodernism, postcolonial studies and queer theory, as they have been used in media studies. Together the first two chapters form a foundation for the remainder of the book, which is concerned with looking in detail at five broad areas.

Chapter 3, Advertising and Postfeminism, both reviews earlier studies of gender in advertisements and provides a new analysis of how advertising is changing. Several themes of postfeminist advertising are discussed, including the prevalence of gender reversals and revenge ads, the development of images of empowered, (hetero) sexually active young women, and the growth of 'queer chic' in advertising.

Chapter 4 looks at news and gender. Set against the context of journalism's transformation from a public service to a market-led product,

the chapter examines the rise of 'infotainment' or 'newszak' and considers the gender dimensions of this shift. What makes something newsworthy? How are women represented in the news? Is news being dumbed down? And what is meant by the 'feminization' of journalism? A detailed case study of the reporting of sexual violence provides an opportunity for evaluating the continuities as well as changes in news about gender.

Television talk shows are the subject of chapter 5. The chapter distinguishes between audience discussion programmes, the therapeutic genre and 'trash' or confrontation talk shows, and considers whether talk shows constitute a new 'public sphere' which today eclipses political institutions as a site of significant public debate. Notions of the talk show as the new 'confessional' are also discussed and the chapter examines whether talk shows might be empowering for marginalized groups by giving voice to people not usually heard on mainstream TV and allowing the articulation of anti-normative messages.

Chapter 6 focuses on magazines. It describes some of the shifts in recent years in magazines aimed at girls and women, in particular the adoption of a feminist register, the emphasis upon celebrity, and the promotion of the sexualized body as the key site of femininity. It also examines in detail the rise of the 'lad magazines' since the mid-1990s and asks how this should be understood – as a response to feminism, a reaction against 'de-sexualized' new man scripts or a distinctive new classed and racialized articulation of masculinity.

The last of the substantive chapters considers the genre of romance, which has shown remarkable resilience and staying power in the face of significant social structural shifts and ongoing transformations of intimacy. Focusing on *Bridget Jones's Diary* and the rise of 'chick lit' the chapter examines constructions of gender, 'race' and sexuality and asks in what ways contemporary popular depictions of heterosexual love are different from earlier romances. These texts are interesting because they are structured both by conventional formulas and by an engagement with feminism. Do they offer new versions of heterosexual partnerships? How different are their constructions of femininity and masculinity compared with Harlequin or Mills & Boon novels? Why and in what way have singleness and the body become such preoccupations? The chapter concludes with a discussion of two popular TV shows – *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* – to put forward an argument about a new postfeminist sensibility.

This argument is developed in the conclusion, which draws together the strands of the book and attempts to provide an assessment of some of the ways in which the representation of gender in the media is changing – partly in response to feminism. The concluding chapter

also returns to questions about cultural politics, and, in the light of the arguments provided in the book, asks what kinds of intervention are needed today to engage with and challenge representations of gender in the media in order to produce gender relations that are more equal, open, generous and hopeful.

Gender and the Media

Introduction: Representations Matter

WE live in a world that is stratified along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, disability, sexuality and location, and in which the privileges, disadvantages and exclusions associated with such categories are unevenly distributed. We also live in a world which is increasingly saturated by media and information and communication technologies. In many respects, the last four decades of research in feminist media studies has been an attempt to explore the relationship between these two facts.

Starting from the proposition that representations matter, feminist analyses of the media have been animated by the desire to understand how images and cultural constructions are connected to patterns of inequality, domination and oppression. Sometimes this has involved examining representations and textual practices in some detail. Sometimes it has emphasized the active, creative negotiations that audiences make with texts. Sometimes the pleasures offered by the media have been foregrounded, and at other times their ideological impact has been stressed. Occasionally, researchers have gone 'behind-the-scenes' to look at the production of particular media, or at the political economy of media industries which means that some media products are made, while others are not even dreamed. Taken together this research has produced a field that is vibrant, exciting and diverse. It is a field that strives to be both theoretically engaged and empirically driven, and which produces rigorous analyses in the context of ethical and political commitments to creating a more just world.

The study of gender and media is extraordinarily heterogeneous. Researchers may agree that cultural representations constitute an important site for examination and struggle, but on all else they disagree. The field is thus characterized by a plurality of different approaches and perspectives: different methodologies, different theoretical perspectives, different epistemological commitments, different understandings of power, different conceptualizations of the

relationship between representations and 'reality', and different understandings of how media images relate to individuals' sense of identity and subjectivity. A feeling for the differences and debates should emerge throughout this book, and the diversity of different approaches is dealt with in detail in chapter 2. In this chapter I want to offer an overview of the field, looking at some of its central themes and preoccupations and examining how and why the study of gender and the media has changed. Of course, this review is a partial and interested one, and its focus is upon laying the foundations to think about how representations have changed since the early studies of gender and media in the 1960s and 1970s, how the available critical vocabularies have been transformed, and what kind of feminist cultural critique is now possible.

The chapter is divided into five parts. In the first part I will look at the assumptions that underpinned early feminist studies of the representation of women in the media and will highlight a number of key features of this work, including its connection to and embeddedness in feminist activist communities and its sense of certainty and confidence about both the meaning of images and the possibility of change. This section will then go on to consider the impact of more complex theories of meaning coming from post-structuralist theory, psychoanalysis and deconstruction, and will also examine the 'turn to pleasure'.

The second section of the chapter is concerned with the development of audience studies, as a reaction against problematic notions of textual determinism which posited the viewer/reader/hearer as entirely passive. Three types of audience research are considered: focused on interpretations, pleasures, and the use of media as (domestic) communication technologies. This section also raises dilemmas about the role of the feminist cultural critic: should she be claiming respect for women's pleasures or criticizing gender ideologies; celebrating women's choices or formulating alternative representational strategies? What is the relationship of the feminist intellectual to women as a group?

Section three turns to feminism itself and argues that this too has transformed over the past decades in response to black women's critiques, to post-structuralist theory, to the growth of interest in masculinity and the arrival of queer theory on the intellectual scene.

The fourth section is concerned with feminist cultural politics and activism and explores the diverse ways in which feminist analyses of media representations have been translated into demands for change.

Finally, section five, the conclusion of the chapter, raises questions about the efficacy of contemporary critical vocabularies for both analysing and contesting media representations, briefly discussing

different views of irony, objectification and the incorporation or commodification of feminist ideas, all of which are taken up and discussed in more detail later in the book. Overall, the chapter seeks to highlight the differences and debates within the study of gender and the media and to give a sense of the ongoing transformations in this field as critical, theoretical and political perspectives change alongside profound changes in the media themselves.

Representations of Women in the Media

The 1970s and all that

Those involved in the tide of feminist creativity, thinking and activism that swept the Western world in the late 1960s and 1970s faced a challenge that earlier women's movements had not known: a world dominated by media. Unlike their mothers and grandmothers, second-wave feminists were bombarded daily by representations of womanhood and gender relations in news and magazines, on radio and TV, in film and on billboards. Not surprisingly, then, the media became a major focus of feminist research, critique and intervention.

Early feminist media critique came from a number of different sources. Women working or studying in universities within the newly emerging disciplines of cultural studies or communication studies became increasingly aware of the 'blind spot' that characterized these fields in relation to gender. Whilst research from the 1960s and 1970s had a significant interest in the ideological nature of media (particularly news), it was largely defined in a way that excluded questions about the portrayal of women. It focused instead on topics such as the reporting of demonstrations and industrial disputes. The issues of class and class conflict were paramount – reflecting the early influence of Marxism – and research rarely engaged with gender, race or sexuality (CCCS Women's group 1978). Women in universities found that they were up against the 'male as norm' problem, in which women were frequently entirely invisible, and men were taken to stand for the whole human population.

A second strand of critique came from women who worked within journalism or broadcasting and were concerned about the lack of opportunities for women working within the media. They argued that the lack of interesting fictional roles, the absence of female newsreaders, and the poor representation of women within senior media positions had a profound impact upon how women were seen in society as a whole. Organizations such as Women in Media and the Equality Working Party of the National Union of Journalists in the UK