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Richard Butsch

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Carol J. Clover

Patricia Hill Collins

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Gail Dines

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Evelina Giobbe

Robert Goldman

Herman Gray

Larry Gross

Stuart Hall

bell hooks

Jean M. Humez

Robert Jensen

Sut Jhally

Richard Katula

Jackson Katz

Douglas Kellner

Jean Kilbourne

Annette Kuhn

James Ledbetter

Janet Lee

Jung S. Lee

Minu Lee

Lisa A. Lewis

K

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GENDER, RACE AND CLASS IN MEDIA

A TEXT-READER

EDITED BY

GAIL DINES & JEAN M. HUMEZ

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Preface

Goals and Assumptions of This Reader

This reader is intended to introduce undergraduate students to some of the richness, sophistication and diversity that characterizes contemporary media scholarship in a way that is accessible and builds on students' own media experiences and interests. We aim to help demystify the nature of media culture by examining its production, construction and the meaning-making processes by which media imagery or messages help shape our personal, social and political worlds. Our ultimate goal is a more media-literate and activist public.

The editors are both teachers of undergraduate courses in media studies, sociology, literature, and interdisciplinary women's studies. We both have a strong interest in antiracist feminism and progressive social activism. In our own teaching, we have had difficulty finding in one volume the kinds of current articles by media critics and activists that (a) would introduce the most powerful theoretical concepts in contemporary media studies, (b) survey some of the most influential and interesting genres of contemporary media, and (c) focus on issues of gender, class and race from a critical perspective. We designed this volume to do these three things.

Most of the readings in this book take an explicitly critical political perspective. They assume, as we do, that Western industrialized societies such as our own are stratified along lines of **race**, **class** and **gender**;¹ that everyone living in such a society "has" race, class and gender as well as other aspects of social identity that help structure our experience; and that economic and other resources, advantages and privileges are distributed in-

equitably in part because of power dynamics involving these categories of experience (as well as others). We believe that one goal of a critical education is to enable people to conceptualize social justice more clearly and work toward it more effectively. For us, greater social justice would mean fairer distribution of our society's cultural and economic resources.

Contemporary (multicultural) cultural studies argues that many dimensions of social stratification influence the unequal distribution of power and resources in our society. **Racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism** and others—each system of social domination has its own separate history, dynamic, conditions of existence and material and ideological components. Moreover, each has produced its own social movement in the 20th-century United States—including the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the farmworkers' and Native American rights movements, the women's and gay/lesbian liberation movements and the disability rights movement. Each of these social movements has generated changed consciousness, the desire to change institutions and some real institutional change—although never as much as activists in these movements have sought. To a large extent, moreover, participants in one movement have developed ideology and learned strategy in part from those who have gone before.

Since the 1960s, each of these social movements has criticized media imagery for **stereotyping** and "**symbolic annihilation**" (the latter term, coined by George Gerbner, is used by Larry Gross in "Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media," Chapter 9) and has worked to change media imagery directly. Through demonstrations, testimony at congressional hearings, press conferences, published critiques and the creation of alternative cultural products, social groups conscious of their cultural marginalization have repeatedly attempted to raise consciousness and influence public opinion and public media policy.

These social movements have also produced educational reform movements within the educational institutions where knowledge is generated and transmitted. In the 1960s and 1970s, faculty and students with changed consciousness influenced college and university curricula in significant ways, through pointing out and resisting former social denigration, stereotyping, exclusion and institutional power imbalances—witness the development of such fields as Black or African American studies, Chicano, Latino, Native American, Asian American, and Third World or ethnic studies, as well as women's studies or feminist studies and labor studies.

In bringing the critical insights of activists into the academy, however, scholars have inevitably transformed the language of activism into academic discourse, for better or for worse. Thus powerful political ideas such as "media stereotyping" have been reconceptualized in ways that incorporate a more complex analysis of how media culture operates within a society characterized by social and economic inequality, as the articles in this reader will demonstrate.

In the 1990s, the insights of those critical groups who are still marginalized in academia are effecting research and teaching beyond the self-contained academic units in which they have been institutionalized (such as

Black studies or women's studies). Although the movement toward a more "multicultural" curriculum has detractors and critics, it is the most recent manifestation in colleges and universities of the impulse to change the paradigms of knowledge in ways that will help promote a more egalitarian society.

Media studies today is a complex, **multidisciplinary** and international field that has both resisted and embraced socially critical perspectives. The social movement to have influenced media studies the most dramatically so far has undoubtedly been the women's movement. Although feminists outside of the field of communications had been publishing important critiques of media imagery of women since Betty Friedan's (1963) analysis of women's magazines, in the *Feminine Mystique*, it was not until the late 1970s that feminists within the field had articles and anthologies that could be used in media education—notably, Gaye Tuchman's (1978) *Hearth and Home* and Butler and Paisley's (1980) *Women and the Mass Media*. But by the mid 1980s, **feminist media theory and criticism** had become a major research and publication area, and it continues to be a central approach today (Kaplan, 1987).

The major tasks of feminist work in media studies so far have been (a) making visible the *patriarchal* domination of media industries, in terms of both ownership and *representation*; (b) critiquing the male biases in the field of study itself; (c) bringing formerly neglected and undervalued "**women's genres**" (cultural entertainment forms targeting women audiences) to the foreground as legitimate areas of study; (d) beginning an examination of women's experiences as consumers of media imagery; and (e) encouraging women media producers to experiment with new approaches and themes.

This feminist work in media studies has not been without its critics—most notably women of color. **Black feminist theorists** in particular have argued that (White) feminist theory has been largely blind to the way that women experience the world, not just as gendered but also as racialized and class-located beings (e.g., Bobo & Seiter, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 1990; see also Gaines, 1988). This is part of a wider critique of media studies by scholars of color, who rightly point out that the field has not adequately grappled with the ways in which the politics of race in the United States have informed the development, production, distribution and consumption of media culture, from the 19th century to the present. In the last several years, however, there has been much exciting work in these issues, covering a range of media forms, both historically and in the present—some of which are represented in this reader.

Many scholars who are particularly interested in race and gender have been attracted in recent years to what is called the British "cultural studies" approach or paradigm, because of its progressive politics; because it offers a broader and more democratic definition of **culture** than was used in humanistic areas such as literary criticism in the past; and because of its research methodology, which is more flexible than that of the largely empirical social-scientific research of traditional U.S. communications studies. This book largely reflects this new cultural studies orientation, which the editors find congenial with their own critical perspective. (For a more extended

history and definition of cultural studies, see Chapter 1, by Douglas Kellner, a leading proponent of this approach.)

Although there are now dozens of books and hundreds of journal articles available that take a cultural studies approach to media, the great majority of these are written with graduate students or other scholars in mind. We believe in developing broad-based media literacy at all levels in our society. Therefore, we have taken it as our task to attempt to convey the most powerful insights of this complex new work in as brief and clear a way as possible, in an effort to make it accessible to undergraduate students, including those in introductory media courses.

For the purposes of this book, our subject is a selection of modern U.S. popular cultural forms as conveyed by a variety of mass media technologies, including print (e.g., advertising images in magazines, pornographic pictures or romance novels) and broadcasting/cablecasting technology (e.g., talk shows, soap operas, sitcoms, MTV videos and rap music). We selected forms of **media culture** that we know to be heavily consumed and highly influential among our student populations—although, of course, because of space limitations we could not include everything that falls into this category. Although at the outset we had hoped to be as comprehensive as possible, we ultimately decided to sacrifice some breadth for greater depth in selected areas. Thus, regretfully, we have dropped chapters once planned on film and news—topics that we think are comparatively well covered in other media anthologies and in many excellent individual books—to do more with less well covered forms that we know produce animated discussions among our own students.

This collection of essays includes published journal articles, selections from recent books and several new essays commissioned for this book. Most of the published pieces have been edited by us for length. When editing, we tried to emphasize the essential arguments made in each piece. Readers should be aware, however, that in some cases we have taken just a portion, or highly edited excerpts, of the original, long essay or book chapter, as appropriate for our purposes.

Despite our best efforts, we realize that gender and race are still better represented in our book than is class. Although the British cultural studies orientation reflects the strong emphasis on class of **Marxism**—not surprisingly, given its historical debt to the thinking of Karl Marx—in U.S. academic analysis, in contrast, the concept of class has tended to be “invisible” since the 1950s for complex historical reasons. These include the eclipse of the labor movement, the anti-Communist climate created by House Un-American Activities Committee work of the early 1950s, the Cold War of the last several decades and the primacy of race as the category of social analysis acknowledged by U.S. social science.

We also acknowledge that writings from and about the perspectives of African Americans and White Americans constitute the dominant treatment of “race,” with only a few contributions from other non-White perspectives. So far as we could determine from our bibliographic research, it is primarily in contemporary film studies that sophisticated analyses of racialized media imagery are reaching beyond the White-Black dichotomy, which still largely

characterizes much of U.S. critical writing on race and TV. Similarly, with regard to gender, film studies has seen a wonderful efflorescence of work on gay and lesbian imagery and artists in the last few years (see bibliographies), but the attention to other media forms from this perspective has lagged somewhat behind. Thus the collection is also less comprehensive on heterosexism than on sexism.

Inevitably, any selection of readings reflects the perspectives, values, knowledge and limitations of knowledge of its editors. We welcome comments by users of this book about our selections, about what worked well in the classroom and what did not. And we especially invite suggested articles for future editions.

NOTE

1. For all boldfaced terms encountered in our introductory essays, please see the glossary for more extended definitions.

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