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MEDIA CULTURE AND SOCIETY

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an introduction

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CHAPTER 13
MEDIA, GENDER AND SEXUALITY

FOCAL POINTS

- Feminist criticism of media representations of gender
- Changing representations of femininity: from domestic goddess to glamorous action hero/career woman
- Studies of 'active' female media users and cultural producers
- Understandings of media representations of masculinity
- Arguments about the marginalisation of LGBT people in media

INTRODUCTION

Questions about the relationship between media, gender and sexuality have formed the basis for countless books, articles and dissertations. As in the case of race and ethnicity, discussions of the nature and possible impact of media representations have long been at the centre of such writings. We'll focus in some detail on such matters early in this chapter, outlining the contribution of a range of critical feminist studies of the depiction of women in popular media forms. We'll then look at contrasting approaches that question what they regard as an over-dismissive approach to forms of culture and representation enjoyed by millions of women. This leads us to a switch of focus towards audience studies oriented to the way women use, enjoy and make sense of commonly derided media forms such as romance genres, soaps, celebrity culture and fashion and beauty magazines. We'll then discuss a growing body of work on masculinity and media, before engaging with questions about the representation of LGBT identities in media.

Running through the chapter is the underlying notion that gender categories are culturally constructed. Our understandings and experiences of male, female, masculinity and femininity are, like our conceptions of black, white and Asian, products of a history of human discourse. Drawing on the work of Foucault (1990), Butler (1990) argues gender should be understood as a series of performances based on prevailing understandings of what it is to be male and female. Gender, then, can be thought of as something that we do rather than something that we are. Crucially, at the heart of these performances of male and female are an equally constructed set of understandings of sexuality, that centre on the predominance of heterosexual, opposite sex desire. Dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity, then, revolve around discourses of difference from and desire for the opposite sex and the marginalisation of same-sex desires and identities forms an integral part of this. Meanwhile, rather than being arbitrary or equal constructions, feminists argue that prevailing notions of masculinity and femininity form part of a patriarchal system which legitimates male power and female subordination.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF FEMININITY

MARGINALISATION OF WOMEN

Although women figure prominently within media content, their role often has been secondary to that of men. The number of blockbuster films or television series with a woman in the lead role, as opposed to one in which she functions as 'companion' and/or 'love interest' for a male star remains relatively low, a situation replicated across a range of other dramatic genres. Women are also significantly under-represented in particular types of media. Williams and colleagues' (2009) study of popular video games found that 85% of characters were male and just 15% female. Turning to the prestigious media sphere of news and current affairs, global content research by The Global Media Monitoring Project (2015) found that women accounted for just 24% of the people depicted within news overall and that just 10% of news stories had women as their central focus. Women formed the majority of those depicted in only four of 54 story categories that were analysed. Significantly, the study emphasises that there

is little appreciable difference in these respects between more traditional outlets and newer online news services. Women also tend to be under-represented within key decision-making roles in media institutions. According to Trevor Phillips (2016) of the UK think-tank Policy Exchange, women accounted in 2016 for only 25% of board membership of the country's four major broadcasters. In spite of the importance of this continuing under-representation of women both in media content and institutions, much of what has been written about gender representation has focused upon an analysis of the particular roles in which women are depicted. Such analysis has frequently attacked media for reinforcing a patriarchal system in which women are subject to systematic male domination across society.

THE MALE GAZE

The best-known critique of the depiction of women in media is probably a short article by Laura Mulvey on 1970s' cinema. Drawing on developments of Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, Mulvey (1975: 6) argues that cinema reflects 'the unconscious of patriarchal society' and reinforces the subjugation of women to heterosexual male control and desire. Cinema, she argues, is centred upon *scopophilia*, a Freudian term for childhood voyeurism or the pleasure of 'taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze' (1975: 8). In its stark separation of a darkened, anonymous auditorium from the world that unfolds on-screen, cinema functions as a voyeuristic medium, she argues, encouraging us to take pleasure from looking upon an objectified private milieu.

Crucially, this process is gendered, so that it is women who are set up as the object of scopophilia and men who bear the controlling – and sexually objectifying – gaze. This is ensured by the emphasis on visual sexual appeal in the construction and presentation of female characters:

> In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness… She holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (Mulvey 1975: 9)

The gender imbalance is exacerbated by another aspect to the operation of scopophilia in cinema, which relates to *narcissism*, or the gaining of pleasure through gazing at one's own image. In outlining the 'mirror stage' of child development, Lacan (2001) argues that the child enjoys in the mirror not a reproduction of himself, but something distinct, superior and closer to perfection – an external idealised image against which the self develops. For Mulvey, cinema replicates the role of this superior mirror image, constructing idealised on-screen images of human subjectivity for audiences to identify with and aspire to.

This narcissistic element is also deemed to be strongly oriented to the male audience. While female characters are optimised in their function as sexual objects for the male gaze, the cinematic depiction of males is as subjects of audience identification and aspiration: 'a male star's glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror' (Mulvey 1975: 11). The male cinema-goer, then,

projects his identity onto the active, powerful male star, colluding in his possession and objectification of women. In summary, Mulvey argues that cinema is systematically patriarchal: men are active, independent and in control of their destiny, while the role of women is to satisfy the male gaze and, ultimately, to be possessed.

PATRIARCHAL ROMANCE AND DOMESTICITY

Mulvey's notion of the male gaze and her broader emphasis on the media subjugation of women have proved enormously influential, forming part of a broader critique of gender representations. While critical feminist analyses of pornography, such as those focused upon in Chapter 7, applied the notion of female objectification to the most explicit media depictions of female sexuality (Dworkin 1981; MacKinnon 1988), other theorists examined more mainstream media depictions which presented women as subordinate to and dependent upon men, particularly within the domestic roles of wife and mother.

A study of advertising by Erving Goffman (1979) identified a series of themes pervading the representation of men and women in magazine advertisements. When heterosexual couples were presented together, men were either taller or higher up than women and the implied power difference was reinforced by an admiring gaze from the latter. Women also were frequently represented in submissive postures – lying down, bending their knees, canting their heads or smiling deferentially. Another common trait was 'licenced withdrawal', where women appeared to be distracted – avoiding eye contact, withdrawing their attention, daydreaming or fiddling with objects. Goffman notes that, while men's use of objects tended to be functional and definite, women frequently were shown caressing objects in a distracted, emotional or sexual way. Overall, Goffman concludes that men were presented as independent, rational and clear thinking, while women appeared subordinate, dependent, emotional and absent-minded.

The depiction of women within magazine representations has also been a focus for criticism. A study of teenage girl's magazine, *Jackie*, by Angela McRobbie in the 1970s illustrates a relentless emphasis upon heterosexual romance. Picture stories with titles such as 'As Long as I've Got You' depicted cliché-ridden tales of love between 'dewy eyed women' and 'granite jawed heros' (McRobbie 2000: 81). Getting and keeping a man was presented as the primary concern, a goal whose achievement involved reconciling this 'natural' female desire for romantic attachment with an equally innate promiscuous tendency in men. Other magazine features reinforced the theme, with pop music coverage focused upon the romantic potential of male stars and relentless emphasis on fashion and beauty predicated, argues McRobbie, 'upon the romantic possibilities it precipitates' (2000: 101). In a nod toward Mulvey, McRobbie emphasises that the Jackie girl 'is intended to be looked at' (2000: 76).

Emphasis on women's dependency forms one of a litany of complaints against media raised by Gaye Tuchman (1978), who argues that representations in news, television and adverts were responsible for the 'symbolic annihilation of women'. Reviewing a range of quantitative studies, she concludes that media misrepresented women by disproportionately confining them within the home, reinforcing their association with cooking and child-rearing and their financial dependence on men. Occasional appearances at work were restricted to subordinate roles such as nursing and clerical work and women within

such roles, she claims, were often condemned or trivialised (1978: 8). Such conventions predominated, she argues, even within female-oriented media such as soap opera and women's magazines. While more prone to respond to progressive social change than television, the latter, for example, are ultimately deemed to have retained a clear emphasis on marriage, motherhood and domesticity (1978: 24).

POST-FEMINIST INDEPENDENCE?

THE GLAMOROUS CAREER WOMAN

Representations of women have changed considerably since the 1970s. In particular, the emphasis on domesticity and traditional romance identified by Tuchman has been at least partially replaced by more independent versions of femininity. Targeted at financially independent career women, magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* have for some time constructed an image of women who, on the face of it, go out and get what they want, something expressed in their careers, disposable income and engagement in relationships and sex on their own terms. Sometimes referred to as 'post-feminist', this more confident, independent woman also appears frequently in advertising. Chanel's campaign for its *Allure* perfume range in the early 2000s, for example, featured images of assertive and successful women set against captions outlining their professional identity. And it sometimes extends to cinema and television. One of the most discussed examples in recent decades has been TV series, *Sex and the City*, which centres on the sexual exploits and dilemmas of a group of professional 30-something career women. The four women have different attitudes to sex and relationships but all have brief sexual encounters, periods of being single and longer-term relationships. And the show explicitly highlights their independence – they consume autonomously and are assertive in their relationships, while their female friendship group forms the most consistent and dependable aspect of their lives.

   In comparison with earlier representations, the presence and popularity of images of single, financially and sexually autonomous women should not be under-estimated. It both illustrates and contributes to changing social attitudes about what it is to be a woman. Yet not everything has changed. She may be a professional success story rather than a domestic goddess and sexually assertive rather than romantically deferential, but two elements identified by earlier critics remain in many such depictions: the need to look good and the need for male attention. And the two are inextricably linked, of course, by Mulvey's notion of the male gaze. It is partly for this reason that Angela McRobbie (2008) argues that such images constitute a post-feminist masquerade: they emphasise particular versions of female independence, she suggests, while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchy.

   If anything, the shift towards the confident city girl representation has further concentrated the emphasis on looking good through discerning consumption. According to an influential 1990s study by Ellen McCracken (1992), rather than being coincidental, this reflects a mutual dependency between media and the cosmetic and fashion industries. The editorial agenda of women's fashion/beauty magazines fits seamlessly with the need to sell advertising space to fashion and cosmetics companies. Such magazines link together the themes of looking attractive and consuming fashion and beauty products with a third one: (hetero)sexual attention and relationships. Even the pose of the model or celebrity on the cover of women's fashion and

beauty magazines implies an out-of-shot male presence, argues McCracken, her confidence, status and beauty associated with being desired. The cover image of perfect femininity and sexual success acts as a 'window to the future self' of the reader if she takes heed of the magazine's advice and consumes the fashion and cosmetics of its advertisers (McCracken 1992).

Similar themes can be identified in *Sex and the City*. The identities and aspirations of the characters revolve around their extensive consumption – mostly of clothing and accessories – and their relationships with men. And, while relationship patterns undoubtedly contrast with previously dominant images, the non-attached lifestyles of the women are subject to greater uncertainty as the show progresses, with the more traditional theme of 'looking for Mr Right' lingering ever-larger (Gill 2007: 242). Amidst her short-term liaisons, the story of the show's central character, Carrie, is dominated by an on-off relationship with one man, 'Mr Big' and the show's climax involves him travelling to Paris to finally declare his love for her. As a consequence, Gill argues that *Sex and the City* 'works to re-establish and re-affirm precisely the boundaries it appears to threaten' (2007: 246).

The glamorous career woman trope also tend to be white, young, slim, glamorous, straight and wealthy, projecting a version of femininity that largely excludes larger, darker-skinned, non-straight and working-class femininities. As well as being marginalised in general, Cynthia Carter (2014) suggests that older and minority women are often confined to stereotypical roles that relate to the integration of their gender with age or ethnicity. The ways gender intersects with other characteristics in media representations provides an important reminder that women should not be understood or studied as a single, undifferentiated category.

THE SEXY ACTION HERO

Another form of female characterisation that has become relatively common-place in recent years is that of the sexy female action-hero. Typified by films such as *Lara Croft Tomb Raider*, *Underworld*, *Charlie's Angels*, *Wanted*, *The Avengers* and the depiction of Wonder Woman in *Batman versus Superman: Dawn of Justice*, this trope has been lauded for the plot centrality, toughness and independence of such characters, which contrast starkly with traditional love-interest characterisations in action movies. Yet they share with the glamorous career-woman trope an explicit emphasis on sex appeal. Such characters typically wear tight, revealing clothing and are immaculately made-up, while scenes and camera work are carefully choreographed
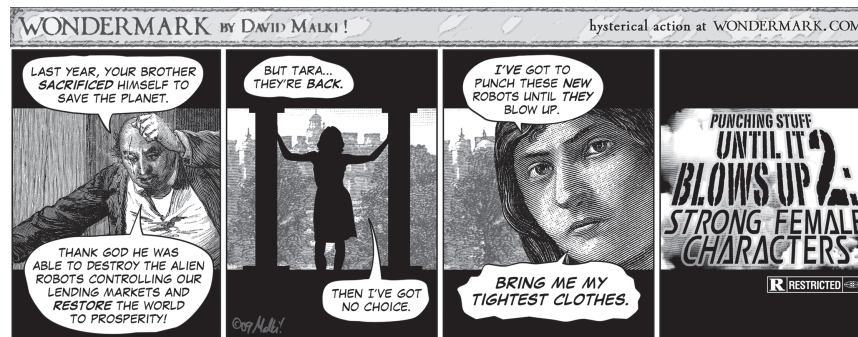

Figure 13.1   Wondermark comic, courtesy of wondermark.com, © 2009 David Malki!, http://www.wondermark.com/521

to emphasise sex appeal. As well as appearing in the world of film, sexy action women are prevalent within mainstream video-games, the appeal of playing or interacting with physically tough yet sexually objectified women – pioneered by the original video-game version of *Tomb Raider* – having been carefully cultivated to appeal to a male-dominated consumer base. Recent video analysis by Anita Sarkeesian (2016) demonstrates the extent to which depictions of playable female action protagonists across a range of games are depicted in a manner that draws obvious and repeated attention to their bottoms, for example.

DIVERSIFYING REPRESENTATIONS

Not all 'progressive' representations of women in recent decades fit into the glamorous career woman or sexy action hero stereotypes, however. Although their most frequent depiction of women continues to centre on some variant of the love interest and/or sex object role, some blockbuster movies have featured women as active, powerful characters in their own right. Ripley, in the classic *Alien* films, is infinitely tougher, cleverer and more determined than all her comrades of either gender and not primarily coded for sex appeal. Likewise, Sarah Connor develops into a tough female lead throughout the first two *Terminator* films and a spin-off series, without recourse to objectification. Interestingly, both the depictions in *Alien* and *Terminator* focus on another traditional feminine theme – that of motherhood – but the action-filled roles of Ripley and Connor are about as far as one could get from the passive domestic goddess.

More recently, lead female characters such as Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* movies and Rey in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* have moved significantly beyond established or newer stereotypes, presenting as strong, independent heroes who are neither sexually objectified nor reliant on men. In the case of Katniss Everdeen, an emphasis on complex and sometimes confused romantic feelings and on nurturing qualities forms part of the characterisation, but integrated with this is an overall focus on her inner-strength, leadership and abilities. Rey, meanwhile, presents as determined, skilled and courageous throughout and is neither coded as a sex object nor a romantic interest. Rey's gender comes to the fore only in the context of her dismissive responses to attempts to look after and protect her by the film's male co-lead, Finn.

Characters such as Katniss and Rey remain exceptional in the world of blockbuster movies, something betrayed by the amount of discussion and analysis of them. And the omission of Rey from certain games and toys that featured characters from *The Force Awakens* offered a reminder of the embeddedness of the conventions being challenged by the character. Nevertheless, a greater range of female characters have been establishing themselves in the world of television drama for some years. In recent years, for example, *The Good Wife* has been praised by some for its balanced depiction of lawyer Alicia Florrick, in relation to her balancing of the demands of a demanding high profile career, those of parenting teenage children, and the expectations that come from having been married to a high profile politician. *The Walking Dead*, meanwhile, has included a rich variety of tough and non-sexualised female characters as part of its depiction of the struggle to survive in a post-apocalyptic world, even if the leader of the group depicted in the series is male.

Orange is the New Black, meanwhile, takes us several steps further, the setting of a women's prison offering the opportunity to explore a complex and diverse range of female

characters of different ages and backgrounds, along with the relationships they develop with one another. Highly unusual in its overwhelmingly female cast and in devoting such time to intra-female relationships, the series breaks out of a tendency elsewhere for women primarily to be depicted interacting with men, or interacting with women about men. Famously observed in a 1980s comic written by Alison Bechdel, the dearth of meaningful or multifaceted female-to-female interactions in popular film or drama has given rise to what some now term the Bechdel test, as a means to assess depictions of women in popular culture. Quite simply, if two or more women interact with one another about something other than a man, then the series, film or advert passes the test.

ENDURING OBJECTIFICATION

Unfortunately, however, not only are there many media texts that fail the Bechdel test, but plenty of representations of women that are more unambiguously objectifying. The use of sexualised images of women as an easy form of 'click-bait' on some news websites, for example, has become commonplace in recent years, with *Mail Online*'s international commercial success owing partly to a right-hand side-bar dominated by images of the partially uncovered bodies of female celebrities and others. The broader emphasis on female celebrity bodies, meanwhile, often serves to reinforce some of the most entrenched gender stereotypes. Eric Meyers' (2014) analysis of celebrity gossip blogs and magazines suggests their emphasis on identifying flaws or secrets through intense focus on female bodies constantly polices femininity. As a case study, Meyers discusses gossip about possible celebrity baby bumps, based on the wearing of loose clothing or slight bulges in the stomach. For Meyers, such gossip simultaneously polices what the non-pregnant female body and clothing should be like (perfectly slim, tight clothing) and invokes stereotypes and judgements about fidelity and suitability for motherhood (Meyers 2014).

Elsewhere, in the world of video-games, heated debate has raged relating to representations of women. Alongside extensive emphasis on women's sexualised bodies through attire, posture and visual emphasis, video games have frequently featured women as objects of male violence, sources of motivation or reward for male protagonists or as 'Damsels in Distress' in need of male rescue (Sarkeesian 2013). While more complex, nuanced and positive female characterisations are increasingly visible (Carr 2006), gaming as a format continues to provide examples of the most regressive forms of gender objectification. Feminist criticisms of sexism within gaming culture from Anita Sarkeesian and others, meanwhile, have been greeted by some male gamers with online abuse, threats and intimidation.

ELITIST CRITICS?

In spite of the persistence of representations of women which might be deemed problematic, some feminists have urged a degree of caution with respect to exactly what is criticised and how, questioning what they regard as the over-dismissive approach of some of their peers, especially when it came to depictions of women in genres popular among female audiences. From the early 1980s, concerns have been expressed that the uncompromising criticism of

writers such as Gaye Tuchman, for example, might have the inadvertent effect of denigrating lifestyles and media genres that were central to the everyday lives and identities of many ordinary women. There are three elements to this concern.

First, in labelling certain representations as 'negative' or inaccurate, some critics are argued to have ignored the elements of congruence between some such 'negative' images and the identities of millions of women (Pickering 2001). Calls for the replacement of 'negative' representations with 'positive' ones sometimes suffered, as did similar arguments in relation to ethnicity (see Chapter 12), from difficulties with respect to what exactly was 'positive', who was qualified to decide and what the relationship was between being 'positive' and faithfully representing the range of women's real lives, tastes and interests. At times, the approach of some early critics appeared to equate 'positive' exclusively with assertive, independent, powerful, and career-minded representations, something that meant, for example, that images of motherhood, domesticity, marriage and attachment to the family were in danger of being entirely dismissed as 'negative'.

Second, some feminist critics appeared to fall into an elitist dismissal of cultural texts enjoyed by millions of women, from fashion magazines, to romance genres and, more recently, celebrity gossip blogs. While their observations may not have been entirely invalid, the targeting of criticism at such genres carried the danger of establishing a gulf of perspective between such critics and many of the women they claimed to speak for. The implication sometimes was that such women were ignorant, duped or suffering from false-consciousness. For a recent example, we might consider protest and criticism relating to the 2015 film adaptation of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Feminist commentators lined up to attack the film's damaging depiction, as they saw it, of wealthy entrepreneur Christian's aggressive sexual pursuit of college student Ana and his enticement of her into submissive forms of BDSM. Yet, whether or not their complaints were valid, the extent of the dismissal of the film among some feminists sat a little uncomfortably with the huge popularity of its depictions with female audiences, the book version of the title having achieved well over 100 million sales globally.

Some of the criticism of the gender depictions in *Fifty Shades of Grey* seemed also to connect with broader dismissals of the quality of the story and, by implication, those who chose to consume and enjoy it, providing a recent example of the concern that feminist critics sometimes have adopted a tone comparable to general attacks on vulgar mass culture, such as those of the Frankfurt School and contemporary critics of media 'dumbing down'. Often made by male academics or critics, these broader criticisms have tended to target types of media that are popular among women, including pop music, consumer magazines, daytime talk shows, soap opera, celebrity gossip and romance genres. Such criticism, some argue, yearns for a version of quality which satisfies a dispassionate, masculine, public agenda, while attacking the tastes and priorities of many women. By themselves attacking 'feminine' genres, some feminist media critics are deemed to have reinforced this denigration of female tastes and pleasures (Modleski 1982). Joke Hermes outlines her concern with the approach as follows:

> The feminist media critic is prophet and exorcist, even while being, as many claim, an 'ordinary woman' too. Feminists… speak on behalf of others who are, implicitly thought to be unable to see for themselves how bad such media

> texts… are. They need to be enlightened; they need good feminist texts in order
> to be saved from their false consciousnesses and to live a life free of false depic-
> tions… of where a woman might find happiness. (Hermes 1995: 1)

This brings us to a third problem – that like many other deconstructions of ideology in media
content, feminist critics sometimes assumed that the transmission of gendered meanings
was predetermined, with the implication that audiences were being passively indoctrinated.
In Mulvey's critique of cinema, for example, it is assumed the gaze of the audience is always
positioned as male so that even female audience members are forced into this perspective.
Greater consideration of audience dynamics surely would illustrate that there are various
opportunities for women to gain visual or erotic pleasure, either via a heterosexual gaze
focused on male characters, or a lesbian female-to-female gaze (Gauntlett 2008). The deter-
mination that a given representation or set of representations are definitively either patriarchal
or counter-hegemonic, then, may take insufficient account of the way the texts in question are
used by different consumers. A range of detailed studies of female audiences since the 1980s
have sought to address this.

EMPOWERING POSSIBILITIES

READING THE ROMANCE

One of the first studies to focus in detail on female audiences was Janice Radway's
analysis of the world of romantic fiction. Popular with some women, this literary genre
had been subject to extensive feminist criticism – not entirely unlike the more recent and
more explicitly erotic example of *Fifty Shades of Grey* perhaps. Such critics attacked the
apparently standardised, patriarchal and heterosexist narratives of stories that invariably
involved lost, unfulfilled women finding salvation and fulfilment in the arms of a tough,
assertive male lover. Without fully rejecting such criticism, Radway (1987) asserts that
in order to understand the significance of the genre we must examine how it is used and
interpreted by readers. Using detailed qualitative interviews with members of a group of
avid readers, Radway's study foregrounds the role novels played within everyday lives
dominated by domestic responsibilities.

Radway learned that one of the most important motivations for reading was that the act of
doing so enabled women to claim time and space within the home. It was 'a way of temporar-
ily refusing the demands associated with their social role as wives and mothers' and even 'a
declaration of independence' (Radway 1987: 9). Yet rather than being isolating, reading also
connected them to broader communities of readers. Turning to their engagement with the con-
tent itself, Radway emphasises the sophisticated and informed choices made by women with
respect to authors and plot types. Notably, their preferred endings tended to involve not only
the submission of the heroine to the masculine sexuality of the male, but also his submission
to her desire for more feminine forms of love. For Radway, such plots provided emotional
replenishment for women who were constantly called upon to care for others, through offer-
ing a fantasy of being nurtured as well as sexually fulfilled. While this does not necessarily

make the act of reading counter-patriarchal, Radway insists that the women enacted a small-scale appropriation of the texts, interpreting the plots in a way that resolved unsatisfactory elements of their everyday contexts.

SUBVERSIVE PLEASURES?

Radway's study is widely regarded as a pioneering contribution to the study of female audiences. Yet she is criticised by Ien Ang (1996) for having ended up too detached from the women in her study, interpreting the political significance of their accounts from an 'outside' feminist position rather than appreciating their enjoyment on its own terms. Ang's own work (1985) also examined audience responses to a popular and often derided product – the US soap opera *Dallas* – which, for many, was a symbol of the swamping of the globe with superficial US mass culture. Ang rejects such 'ivory tower' accusations while resisting presenting use of the text as a form of resistance for down-trodden audiences. Instead, she emphasises the fundamental importance of the everyday emotional pleasures associated with 'loving Dallas' – pleasures connected to the show's emotional realism which, rather than acting as an 'escape', became intricately interwoven with everyday life and identity.

Other theorists have focused more explicitly on soap opera as a significant female-oriented genre that offers progressive and empowering possibilities (Baym 2000; Brunsdon 1997; Fiske 1987; Geraghty 1991, 2006). Christine Geraghty argues that, through their emphasis on strong, influential female characters and perspectives, soaps explore women's lives, interactions and perspectives in a depth unusual elsewhere, allowing audiences to engage with discourses about 'the way in which relationships… between men and women could be differently organised on women's terms' (1991: 117). Notably, soaps replace linear 'climax' narratives ending with heterosexual love with ongoing multi-narrative structures, so that romantic arrangements are never complete and always subject to disruption and threat. They also are argued to be less overtly centred upon feminine spectacle than some other genres, with a greater focus on everyday life and, according to Fiske, on sexuality as 'a positive source of pleasure in a relationship, or a means of her empowerment in a patriarchal world' (Fiske 1987: 187). Studies of soap audiences, meanwhile, have illustrated the discerning, selective, engaged and critical nature of female viewers of the genre (Hobson 2006), as well as the ways the genre has given rise to online spaces for female-dominated audience reflection and interaction on the plots, narratives and issues they raise (Baym 2000). Geraghty sums up the conclusions of the body of work on soaps and women viewers as follows:

> If soaps, then, were women's fiction, these studies revealed that it was not just because of the stories they told or the heroines (and villainesses) they offered, but because of the way their viewers felt about these programmes… For many, soap viewing was accompanied by female-dominated talk… Even when men watched… it was claimed that women viewers defined the way in which the programmes were understood and their role in everyday life… (2006: 132)

Although they place emphasis on differential readings and uses, many audience studies have remained focused on the kinds of meanings audiences generate. In contrast, a study of women's

magazine readers by Joke Hermes (1995) sought to focus primarily on the broader role of reading itself within everyday lives. A key finding was that readers themselves didn't always attach much importance to content, or take it particularly seriously. Most found some features useful either in practical or emotional terms and selectively integrated these into their lives, but Hermes' interviews were dominated by discussion of the compatibility of the act of magazine reading itself with everyday routines. They were deemed easy to pick up and put down and ideal for 'relaxation', through taking time out either from work, worries or other people.

Focusing more closely on readers' engagements with the specific content of magazines, Dawn Currie (2003) suggests teenage women's magazine readers tended to be sceptical about glossy ads and images and more focused on what they saw as the realism of textual articles such as advice columns, which they connected with their everyday lives. Currie also identified a 'pick 'n' mix' approach to reading whereby significant amounts of content are simply bypassed. This finding is replicated in a study by David Gauntlett (2008), which also identified a range of different attitudes to content. Some regarded fashion-related images and advice as providing goals and means for self-improvement, some enjoyed criticising the identities depicted, while others regarded the magazines as an escapist pleasure of little real-life relevance. Readers also displayed diverse views about the impact of magazines, with some sharply critical of the versions of femininity and masculinity they presented. Without fully rejecting feminist criticisms of magazine content, Gauntlett emphasises that such publications offer a more contradictory set of ideas than they are sometimes given credit for and that readers draw on these in a variety of ways.

FEMINIST PROSUMERS?

In recent years the focus for feminist media scholars increasingly has been on the activities of women who have challenged dominant gender relations not only as active audiences, but as critics, appropriators and producers. An early example that precedes the era of mass digital participation is the 1990s Riot Grrrl scene which countered male domination in the music industry through all-female bands who angrily repudiated traditional gender roles, flaunting an aggressive and uncompromising sexuality through music, imagery and on-stage performance. The scene was characterised by a punk-inspired DIY ethic in which, as well as being encouraged to pick up guitars or organise events, participants produced a substantial grassroots network of printed and eventually online zines featuring a range of content related to gender, sexuality and female empowerment (Leonard 1998: Schilt and Zobl 2008). Although the movement gradually shifted out of the public eye, Schilt and Zobl argue that the network of DIY communication it gave rise to continues to thrive underground in the form of websites, blogs and online forums (ibid.).

Studies of female popular media fan groups, meanwhile, have focused upon interactive fan activities that can subvert dominant gender representations. In a classic study, Constance Penley (1991) focused on the female-dominated phenomenon of 'fan fiction', whereby fans compose their own stories based on the setting or characters of existing television, film or novels. Penley's particular focus was on 'slash', a sub-genre focused on the development of romantic and sexual storylines. Typically, such stories subvert the patriarchal and hetero-sexual orientation of the original fiction by exploring same-sex encounters between male

characters. As well as contesting dominant understandings of mainstream fictions such as *Star Trek* and *Harry Potter*, such interpretations allude to understandings of sexuality as flexible and unfixed. In their recent study of a Harry Potter fan fiction website, Karlsson and Ohlin-Scheller (2015) explore how traditional gender subject positions can be partially contested through the live, collaborative development of fan stories on the internet. While noting that, in the example they observed, heteronormative understandings ultimately prevailed, they note how interactions appropriated and played with standard gender tropes and how, in general, girls were considerably more active than boys in the fan story.

In spite of its significance, fan fiction remains something of a minority practice engaged in by unusually committed or engaged groups. Yet in recent years, social network sites, among other easily accessible interactive media, have become everyday forms of communication and gender expression for countless ordinary young women. Central to the use of such media are representations of oneself and one's friends via text, images and sometimes video. According to Amy Shields Dobson (2011; 2014), sharing self-representations and interacting with those of others via social media have become key components in how young people learn about and contribute to constructions of male and female. Focusing on the images young women foregrounded and shared on the MySpace profiles, Dobson identifies a complex mixture of representations that may be open to different interpretations with respect to their reinforcement and/or subversion of hegemonic gender categories.

With respect to the images foregrounded on their profile pages, Dobson identified in a number of examples of what she terms 'hetero-sexy' images that – at face value – presented objectified, sexualised images of heterosexual bodies (2011). These included sexualised images of idealised unidentified 'dream-girls' and female celebrities, depictions of heterosexual sex and images of themselves in poses that appeared to replicate the imagery of dominant fashion and beauty, advertising or soft-porn. While recognising how such images 'hold connotations of objectification and complicity with a masculinised gaze' and that profiles are often generated in an atmosphere of peer pressure, Dobson suggests the context of self-production here may complicate things somewhat, indicating at least a partially active embrace of 'gazing back', ironic or critical uses of such imagery and/or agentic communication of the pleasure of being seen (Dobson 2011).

In addition to such hetero-sexy images, however, Dobson (2014) also identifies a preponderance of what she calls 'performative shamelessness' in the form of laddish representations, particularly when it came to images users posted of their friends and friendships. Here, young women still are the focus of visual attention but, rather than seeking to approximate perfect constructions of feminine beauty, images tend to emphasise assertive, humorous poses and activities, including 'silly' or caricatured faces; wide open mouths and protruding tongues; displays of drunken and rowdy behaviour and exaggerated masculine postures: 'heads are back and bodies are sometimes doubled over in an antithesis of grace and modesty… poses with their limbs akimbo, spread out and space-occupying' (Dobson 2014: 150). Dobson explores the complex and contradictory implications of such imagery, noting the importance of sexual and even pornographic inferences at times as well as the apparently subversive, exaggerated caricatures of inappropriate and/or laddish forms of behaviour. She suggests such self-selected humorous and grotesque bodily representation on social network sites may represent a partial challenge to the fantasy feminine ideals emanating from the fashion and beauty industries, including those that could be identified elsewhere on their profiles (Dobson 2014).

IDENTIFYING AGENCY, REMAINING CRITICAL

Studies of the activities of female audiences and, more recently, prosumers, have been important in illustrating some of the limitations of feminist criticism of popular media texts and drawing attention to the agency of media users. Yet critical textual analysis ought not to be entirely abandoned in favour of a celebration of user pleasure and/or empowerment. Ang's endorsement of viewing pleasures, for example, may be lauded for celebrating ordinary pleasures but comes at the possible cost of letting media producers off the hook with respect to the ways they encode particular representations into texts. Similarly, although Hermes' emphasis on the validity of magazine reading as an active activity is illuminating, the strength of her dismissal of more critical and text-based approaches may underrate their enduring importance. Williamson's accusation that feminist audience studies were in danger of endorsing a 'pointless populism' (cited in Gill 2007: 16) is overly-harsh, but the warning therein that the study of media and gender must not lose its critical edge is pertinent.

The testimonies of female audience members illuminate a diverse range of engagements and, sometimes, critical negotiations with media texts, reminding us that the impact of content ought never be taken for granted. Meanwhile, the participatory activities of female media users, from fan fiction groups to individual social media users, illustrate that media industries do not have a monopoly on the construction of gender. Such details about users, though, do not preclude the possibility that consistent themes in widely circulated media representations might have a broader pervasive influence. If there are limits to the range of understandings of femininity readily accessible within the content of a given advert, magazine, film or television programme, and if these limits are consistent with dominant existing understandings, then it is not unreasonable to identify the text as having the potential to reinforce such understandings. The constructions of gender available within media content continues to warrant careful critical analysis.

MEDIA AND MASCULINITIES

Partly as a result of the substantial contribution of feminism to the study of gender and media, a good deal of what has been written on the subject has been centred upon women, something reflected in the structure of this chapter. Yet the way in which men and masculinity are constructed in media, alongside the role of men as media producers and audiences, is every bit as important to discussions about gender, sexuality and identity – and over the past two decades has been afforded a gradual increase in analytic attention.

MASCULINITY OR MASCULINITIES?

As Mulvey observes, the cinematic male lead is typically a dominant, powerful and sexually successful focus for male-centred audience identification. And in spite of elements of diversity, recent decades of popular film have been dominated by representations of active, powerful male characters who use their prowess – whether physical or otherwise – to overcome the forces stacked against them and, often, to win the love of the film's lead female. In the 1980s, Fiske (1987) argued that a key element of media representations of masculinity was

a practical orientation towards the successful achievement of goals. The narrative structure of male-oriented television series, he says, tended to consist of a one-dimensional plot progression towards a climax of achievement induced by masculine performance. Most obviously, male power was emphasised, for Fiske, through the physical imagery of muscular bodies triumphing in fist fights and male control of trucks, fast cars and guns. While there has been significant diversification of narrative structures, representations and themes since the 1980s, it is not difficult to find an underlying emphasis on masculine purpose and/or toughness in many contemporary drama series (*24*, *Luther*, *Peaky Blinders*, *Game of Thrones*), blockbuster movies (*Spectre*, *The Amazing Spiderman*, *The Dark Knight Rises*) and, even more so, video games (where there are far too many examples to mention). Even when they are not portrayed in physically tough roles and where there is greater nuance to their characters, men regularly are represented as active, goal-oriented and competitive and as occupying positions of power, authority and responsibility.

Yet even the most overt versions of on-screen masculinity may entail ambiguities with respect to their social significance. The visual construction of extreme physical male prowess, for example, may lend itself in some cases to use as sexual objectification for a straight female or gay male gaze. Deliberate emphasis on the body of Daniel Craig walking out of the sea in swimming shorts in the marketing for *Casino Royale* represents just one example. Emphasis on the scarred, ripped physical body of Geralt at various points in the second and third instalments of hit video game series *The Witcher* is open to a similar reading, even if the series also places more predictable emphasis on female bodies too. The significance of representations of spectacular male physical power to heterosexual male audiences also entails ambiguities when we consider its relationship to everyday life. For Fiske, rather than reinforcing everyday male experience, such images are more likely to act as unrealistic fantasies when compared to the lack of independence, control or power which characterise most ordinary men's lives, particularly in the contemporary workplace (Fiske 1987; also see Harrison 2014; Price 2013). The ongoing decline of traditional male jobs in manufacturing industries has exacerbated the separation between most ordinary men and the physical exploits of their screen heroes, while the diversification of relationships and families, growth of female employment and changes in attitudes towards gender have also contributed to what some term a 'crisis' in the status of masculinity (Horrocks 1994).

Sometimes the changing reality of everyday masculinities is itself the subject of nuanced, complex representations. Stuart Price (2014) explores the significance of rhetoric and speech within 1999 hit *Fight Club* as a complex response to what the film's anti-hero, Tyler, perceives as a loss of authentic masculinity in a world of pointless white-collar jobs, feminised self-help groups and empty consumerism (also see Giroux 2002). While *Fight Club* represents – though does not entirely endorse – a violent and revolutionary reaction to the crisis of masculinity, media representations elsewhere embraced notions of the so-called 'new man', comfortable with gender equality, balancing work and domestic responsibilities, in touch with his emotional side and making considerable effort with his appearance (Harrison 2014). The latter is reflected in a rapidly expanding portfolio of advertisements for men's cosmetic and fashion products, and the significance of the cosmetics and clothing industries in promoting this more narcissistic, nurturing form of masculinity has prompted some to label it 'commercial masculinity' (Harrison 2014). Women's fashion and beauty magazines, meanwhile, sometimes

placed emphasis upon the desirability for women of this more image-conscious, sensitive male. A further source for the 'softening' of male images was the phenomenon of the boy band, which re-emerged in the 1990s in the form of groups such as *Take That* and has continued to thrive since then in the form of *One Direction* and others. Oriented to young female and gay male audiences, the boy band combined some traditional elements of masculinity with style-conscious, sensitive and slightly built 'boy next door' features. Meanwhile, as Gauntlett points out, internationally popular sit-coms such as *Friends* frequently depicted men who combined selected established masculine qualities with 'characteristics of sensitivity and gentleness, and male-bonding' (2008: 65).

CONTRADICTORY REPRESENTATIONS: LADS AND BEYOND

Yet, far from moving seamlessly from a regime of aggressive, powerful stereotypes to one dominated by sensitive caring representations, the development of masculinities is full of conflicts and contradictions. While Connell (2000) argues there is, at any moment in time, a hegemonic version of masculinity that is more influential than others, Gill (2007) suggests identification of such a single dominant type is difficult given the range of competing and overlapping types of maleness. Developing representations of 'lad culture' in recent decades provide an illuminating illustration. Centred upon sex, drinking, cars, sport, gadgets and 'male' popular culture, so-called lad-mags became highly popular for a relatively short period during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Such publications presented themselves as a reassertion of authentic masculinity in the face of the 'new man', who was derided as feminine and/or homosexual. The narrative throughout the magazines emphasises the pragmatic use of women for sex while avoiding having masculinity compromised through permanent commitment to them (Jackson et al. 2001). Women, then, are presented as a source of pleasure but also as a threat to men's natural love for adventure, drinking, sport, cars and having a laugh with their mates.

Beneath the hysterical hyper-masculine exterior of babes, beer, fast cars, sport and laughs, however, were elements to the 'new lad' that sat less easily with traditional masculine confidence. The fashion and personal grooming of commercial masculinity were a constant feature, in connection with an array of cosmetic and clothing ads. Meanwhile, beneath their confident, cocky headlines, advice columns focused on health problems and relationship guidance suggested at least a degree of self-consciousness and insecurity. For Jackson et al., it is through adopting their hyper-masculine veneer that lad's magazines carried off the inclusion of such features. For Gauntlett, this makes representations of the new lad open to a range of possible meanings and uses, containing constant indications of male weakness, alongside what he takes as a playful and ironic hyper-masculine façade (Gauntlett 2008). Gauntlett's argument is compelling in its recognition of the complexity of representations within what initially appears as a one-dimensional text and the possibility of non-patriarchal readings, but ultimately comes across as a little complacent. As Jackson et al. (2001) point out, an ironic tone does not negate the possibility of reinforcing problematic gendered assumptions and may even act as a convenient device that deflects criticism (Jackson et al. 2001).

While some retain an online presence, major lad mags such as *FHM* and *Loaded* no longer exist in print-form, having fallen victim to the general decline in print media and a haemorrhaging

of readers to other formats. Their laddish representations, however, are alive and well, pervading, for example, the BBC's internationally successful *Top Gear*, with its carefully blended combination of fast-car driving, competitiveness and exaggerated masculine antics and banter. The lad trope is equally prevalent in some forms of advertising and, most notably, betting commercials for companies such as Ladbrokes and Betfair that centre on familiar tropes of young men watching the game together and engaging in witty banter. Yet the less traditionally masculine aspects of male representation have also persisted and developed, albeit in conjunction with more reassuring forms of masculine imagery. While the lad magazine format appears to have been consigned to history, magazines such as *Men's Health* have continued to flourish, having successfully transitioned to online as well as print formats. With a mature orientation and tone, such titles typically combine traditional emphasis on sport, fitness and strength with a reflective focus on the male body and mind, from achieving a muscular torso to dressing effectively, eating healthily and dealing with stress and anxiety.

Consumer masculinity, meanwhile, continues to develop. For every lad-focused betting ad, there is a commercial focused upon men using cosmetics or clothing to work on their appearance. And the range of products previously only targeted to women and gay men is expanding. Claire Harrison's (2014) analysis of an example of a men's make-up website, provides a notable example. While using masculine colours and address, reassuring customers as to the difference between their products and women's make-up and placing particular emphasis on the health benefits of its products, the site constructed a version of masculinity centred on wearing make-up to look good. Harrison interprets this as a refocusing of the male gaze onto the male body itself, including through semi-naked images of attractive models encoded as ordinary men enhanced by the company's cosmetics. While examples such as this may be atypical, it is clear that media depictions of men are complex, contradictory and, in some respects at least, changing.

BEYOND HETEROSEXUALITY

Even though the range of representations of both masculinity and femininity are expanding, they both still tend to largely exclude non-heterosexual forms of identity. Opposite sex attraction and encounters between men and women lie at the core of the way media discourses construct masculinity and femininity and the marginalisation of LGBT orientations or identities forms an integral part of this heterosexual matrix, or hegemony (Butler 1990). Alluding to Tuchman's earlier attack on media representations of women, Gross (1995: 63) argues that same-sex desires and identities have been 'symbolically annihilated' or rendered invisible by mass media, adding that 'when they do appear, they do so in order to play a supportive role for the natural order' (Gross 1995: 63). In other words, media representations of minority sexualities have tended to reinforce the prevailing heterosexual hegemony. This is because sexual minorities have tended to be pigeon-holed within stereotyped roles and narratives.

Historically, many of the lesbian characters or personalities to make an appearance in mainstream media, for example, were aggressively dysfunctional or unhappy characters (Arthurs 2004). And Moritz (2004) identifies an ongoing tendency for fictional narratives involving lesbians to end up restoring heterosexual normality in a variety of ways. Typically, she argues,

lesbian characters have tended to be positioned as troubled, dysfunctional or nasty characters who are ultimately either killed off, imprisoned or restored to happiness through a return to heterosexual femininity. In recent times, however, there has been a shift towards a different image of lesbianism – as young, glamorous and ultra-feminine. Lesbian-themed series such as *Sugar Rush* and the *L-Word* have been of importance here, alongside lesbian characters, romances and encounters in a range of other series, including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Guiding Light* and *Grey's Anatomy*. Such representations have the potential to blur some of the boundaries of dominant femininity and raise questions about the exclusive equation of feminine glamour with the male gaze.

Yet lesbianism within mainstream dramatic programming has often tended to consist of a moment of temporary exploration or a one-off relationship, followed by either a return to heterosexuality or an exit from the series, both of which function to restore the heterosexual equilibrium. The narrative conventions of soap opera, in particular, have sometimes marginalised long-term lesbian or gay characters due to an insufficient number of potential partners in the predominantly heterosexual local communities depicted. Meanwhile, although it challenges boundaries, the trend towards glamorous, feminine lesbian representations may reinforce dominant notions of female beauty and, particularly, depictions of femininity as sexualised display. In the world of the narrative, the male gaze may be secondary to female-to-female sexual attraction, but the spectacle of the young, glamorous lesbian encounter on-screen may also be read, in some cases, as sexualised display oriented towards the male viewer. Recently, *Orange is the New Black* has managed to avoid some of these shortcomings, however, its setting of a women's prison enabling exploration of a number of long- and short-term lesbian or bisexual relationships as well as incorporating a transgender character.

Gay men have probably been more frequently represented in mass media than lesbians and other sexual minorities, with a range of male game show hosts, pop stars and actors openly identifying as homosexual for many years, yet depictions of male gay intimacy remain rare. Stereotypes of feminine, camp eccentricity have dominated, often establishing the gay male as a mildly freakish, theatrical figure of fun, positioned at a safe distance from dominant masculinities. Male homosexuality also is frequently represented in its most white, middle-class, sanitised and unthreatening guise (Arthurs 2004). The dependable gay best friend and/or fashion expert has become a particularly familiar stereotype in female-oriented television series, including *Will and Grace* and *Sex and the City* as well as in romantic comedy and reality TV shows such as *Say Yes to the Dress*.

Such representations may be 'positive' in that they present gay men as likeable and friendly members of society, but as well as being guilty of pigeon-holing, their socially-acceptable orientation tends to exclude other elements of gay identities. Notably, the same-sex encounters or romances of the gay best friend tend to be somewhat marginalised and, in particular, explicit male-to-male intimate and sexual contact remains unusual across a range of genres and formats. A similar point could be made, perhaps, in relation to the numerous high profile gay male artists in the popular music industry, many of whom have tended to avoid explicit or clear expressions of their sexuality in lyrics, imagery, interviews or public appearances in order to ensure they remain sufficiently palatable to heterosexual consumers (Doty and Gove 1997).

The example of the gay best friend character also exemplifies a tendency for LGBT characters to be secondary to predominantly heterosexual, binary gender narratives. And according to Doty and Gove, even if homosexuality is positioned more centrally, it tends to be focused on from a heterosexual point of view. 'Heterocentric narrative construction', they argue, 'will, finally, structure the plot to revolve around how straight characters and culture respond to lesbians, gays and queers', so that 'we see these characters primarily through straight gazes and narratives' (Doty and Gove 1997: 88). And this connects to a further point – that the emphasis on attracting straight audiences invariably causes non-heterosexual characters to be isolated within overwhelmingly straight environments or communities. We rarely see much evidence of broader gay peer groups or communities, let alone involvement in collective activism (Arthurs 2004).

This tendency for gay narratives to be marginal and/or sanitised is not ubiquitous, of course. The 1990s UK series, *Queer as Folk* focused in detail on the lives, relationships and encounters of gay men, enabling exploration of a variety of different characters in the context of a gay scene. In contrast to sanitised depictions elsewhere, its narratives included controversial sides of the gay scene as well as overtly sexual storylines and a number of explicit depictions of sexual encounters. More recently, the cartoon series *Rick and Steve* presented a satirical focus on the gay scene, complete with comic storylines about threesomes, lesbian motherhood and even HIV. And non-stereotypical gay characters, complete with light forms of intimacy have been represented in a number of shows, including *The Wire*, *Empire* and *Game of Thrones*.

A particularly striking break from desexualised or secondary representations was provided by the Oscar winning blockbuster, *Brokeback Mountain*, which focused on a long-term love affair between two summer sheep-herders in Wyoming. The film's huge box office success enabled it to break out of the specialist gay content pigeon-holes within which some other productions have been restricted, reaching a large, diverse audience around the world. More recently *Blue is the Warmest Colour* achieved significant critical acclaim for its intense, erotic depiction of a lesbian love affair between a high-schooler and an art student. Encouraging though such examples may be, it remains the case that, outside of high-brow or specialist gay and lesbian media channels, non-heterosexual characters or personalities are often either invisible or stereotyped as a fixed and familiar 'other' (Foucault 1978).

While overt LGBT representations remain limited, there are many characters that are primarily coded as straight, but offer the possibility of queer audience readings (Doty and Gove 1997). What were taken as occasional hints at a lesbian relationship between the main characters of 1990s cult series *Xena Warrior Princess*, for example, prompted many fans to understand them as lesbian icons, even though they were not explicitly presented as such. This was then encouraged by the show's producers, who developed the lesbian sub-text through further hints as the series continued. Meanwhile, as we have already seen, groups of straight, lesbian and bisexual women engaged in online slash fan fiction communities have regularly created storylines centred upon queer interpretations of straight characters in a variety of mainstream series (Jenkins 2003). For Sonia Katyal (2006: 485), inherent to slash as a grassroots, participatory movement is a rejection of 'the notion that gender roles are fixed and predetermined' and an embrace of 'the idea that sexuality can be fluid and filled with various erotic

possibilities'. Even back in the 1990s, the popularity among slash communities of 'queering' outwardly straight characters prompted Doty and Gove (1997: 89) to note that 'almost every figure on television might be "representing" queerness in some way, to some degree, for some viewer'. Once again, we are reminded of the need to recognise the range of audience responses to textual representations and the ways that, particularly in digital, participatory environments such interpretations can contribute to the subversion of dominant structures of meaning. It is not only, as Katherine Sender (2014: 209) puts it, that such environments may be offering to LGBT people the increasing possibility to find 'opportunities to speak, rather than be spoken for', but also that their creativity and participation may in some cases have influence on the producers of the shows they engage with (Jenkins 2003).

CONCLUSION: A BALANCED APPROACH

While studies of the depiction of women have dominated the development of studies of gender, sexuality and media, the growing body of research on masculinities has underlined the need to make sense of the media construction and living out of both female and male forms of identity. Meanwhile developing understandings of LGBT representations in media remind us, among other things, of the crucial link between the reinforcement of dominant understandings of sexuality and prevailing binary constructions of gender. And a rounded understanding is equally dependent upon a balance between emphasis on media representations and on the ways users construct gendered and sexualised identities through their uses of media. We should be cautious of both over-deterministic textual criticism and over-celebratory audience studies. Neither should the structure of media industries be omitted from our analysis, particularly with respect to the relationship between gender constructions and media profitability. After all, the media representations of masculinity and femininity that dominate our various screens normally are those that sell the most tickets, subscriptions and advertising space.

QUESTIONS/EXERCISES

1   a)   Select an example of a recent blockbuster film and try to analyse the construction of its male and female characters using Laura Mulvey's framework. To what extent does your film illustrate or challenge her conclusions?

    b)   How valid is Anita Sarkeesian's critique of the representations of women in video games?

2   What would a 'positive' representation of femininity look like and why? How about masculinity? Are the notions of negative and positive helpful or unhelpful as part of this discussion?

3   a)   What contribution to debates about media and gender has been made by studies of female media audiences and users? If audiences are active and creative, do we need to worry about what is depicted in media content?

   b)   What are Dobson's conclusions about young women's self-representation through images on social networking sites? Do you agree with her?

4   Identify four distinct masculine 'tropes' or 'stereotypes' in contemporary media, providing examples for each one. What are the differences and commonalities between the types you have identified?

5   Discuss the ways apparently straight characters or personalities have been read or reinterpreted by some audience groups as queer? What is the significance of such interpretations?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Dobson, A. (2015) *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan – Detailed exploration of the digital media practice of teenage girls with particular focus on the ways young women represent themselves on social media and elsewhere.

Gill, R. (2007) *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press – Critical account of a broad range of debates and examples relating to media and gender.

Harrison, C. (2014) 'Studio5ive.com: Selling Cosmetics to Men and Reconstructing Masculine Identity', in Ross, K. (ed.) *Handbook of Gender, Sex and Media*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 189–204 – Case study analysis of representations of masculinity on a male make-up website, identifying complex forms of address, including a refocusing on the male gaze.

Mulvey, L. (1975) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16(3): 6–18 – Highly influential article which first established the notion that media depictions of women are oriented to the male gaze.

Radway, J. (1987) *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*. London: Verso – One of the first and most well-known feminist studies of the audiences of often-derided media forms popular with women.