

Preface

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 globalisation; 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 borne 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 lapdancing 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, idealised male body imagery, while the re-sexualisation 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, 1990). Germaine Greer (2000), for instance, argues that today's popular culture is significantly less feminist than that of 30 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'

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 girl zines 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 -e.g. 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 -- e.g. 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 representation of gender in the media, in all its 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 eroticised 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 Rikki 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 'feminisation' 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 earlier generation of "dumb blonde" stereotypes!' Whilst an earlier generation of feminist media activists put stickers or daubed graffiti on advertising images deemed to insult or trivialise 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 poststructuralism 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 e.g. content analysis, semiotics, discourse analysis, discussing their strengths and weaknesses. It also introduces ideas from postmodernism, postcolonialism 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 'feminisation' 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 marginalised 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 sexualised 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-sexualised' new man scripts or a distinctive new classed and racialised 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 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 and 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.