

message also need to be perceived, along with contradictory responses in its audiences. Only thus can we grasp the combination of factors that enable such a media text to reinforce the repression of people of color.

Finally, for U.S. readers, who are often barely aware of the cultural impact the United States has across the globe or of the cultural backdrop of other nations' responses to its planetary power, the international dimensions of cultural studies analysis are especially important. We begin, however, with a focus that strikes a sensitive nerve in every culture, but that promises to extend everyone's frontiers of awareness and enrich their understanding of communication and culture: the question of gender.

18 Gender, Representation, and the Media

LIESBET VAN ZONEN

Arguably, there have been three stages in recent times in the thinking about women. The first was the era of women's suffrage, the demand for the right to vote, a demand that in the United States can be dated back to a famous conference at Seneca Falls in New York State in 1845. In many countries women's right to vote was finally conceded during the 1920s, though in France not until after World War II.

The second phase was that of social movements for women's liberation, emerging in the United States and other countries during the 1960s. These movements took on a much larger agenda than the right to vote. Their targets ranged from sexist images of women in advertising and media to women's confinement to domestic chores, to the unequal salaries and career opportunities (the "glass ceiling") women experience—in other words, the entire spectrum of women's existence, the whole complex array of social and cultural mechanisms that reduce women's freedom in comparison with men's.

The third and most recent phase has been to move beyond focusing simply and solely upon women and their treatment as a way of understanding the issue, to an examination of the whole question of gender in culture and society. What is it that makes males men? Testosterone? Shaving? A passion for competitive sports? Dress? Power

positions! What is it that makes females women? A uterus? Hairstyle? Affection for babies? Dress? Lower pay?

Van Zoonen argues that media play a particularly significant role in confirming and making apparently natural the division between the genders. However, she also argues that in sometimes very subtle ways, and at other times very directly, contemporary media raise questions about our sexual identities in ways that are much closer to how many people privately feel. In other words, simultaneous with an official, "normal," gender-divided culture coexist media texts that echo our frequent real feelings of gender confusion, of which "gender-bending" is one manifestation.

Much of this book is about political and economic power. This chapter addresses an important issue by focusing on the power of gender in media and culture. Further, Van Zoonen introduces the French analyst Jean Baudillard's argument that media do not so much distort reality as create it for us.

In the early 1980s, when I had just moved from a small town in the north of the Netherlands to the capital, Amsterdam, to study political science, one of my friends took me to a bar called Madame Arthur in the red light district. It was a small and crowded place, with a minute stage in the back. If the name didn't ring a bell in my still naive provincial mind, the clientele certainly did; the bar was a hangout for male-to-female transvestites. I was confused and excited. Although I knew about the phenomenon from television, I had never seen real transvestites before, and certainly not from the close distance enforced by the dimensions of Madame Arthur. These men were not men, but they were not like the women I knew either. What were they? Soon the excitement and the spectacle superseded my confusion and I stopped worrying. After all, this was a weekend in Amsterdam, time for enjoyment. It gave me a good story to go home with, so why worry about existential questions?

A few years later, another friend took me to a lesbian dance night. This time, my confusion was not so easily suspended. I knew it was a women-only night, but I saw many women about whom I was rather confused. Menswear, angular body movements, and macho behavior made me wonder, What made these women women? Still, they were

not like the men I knew either. In a way I was envious; they made me feel terribly mainstream and dull, longing for the audacity to transgress the conventional codes of femininity the way they did. I was even more bewildered to find out I felt attracted to some of the women who were really gorgeous men, hoping and at the same time fearing to be noticed by them. The spectacle of it all didn't ease my worries. If their gender was hard to identify, what did my simultaneous jealousy and attraction make me? It was a much more unsettling experience than the night at Madame Arthur, and I left early. Dancing with an acute crisis of gender identity is not much fun, and it doesn't make a good story to go home with.

These two experiences made me realize how important the (re)presentation of one's gender—in the form of body language, dress, makeup, hairstyle, use of language, jewelry, and so on—is for the identification of one's "real" gender, both by others and by oneself. One may even wonder, as I will ask in this chapter, whether there is a fundamental difference between the representation and the "real" thing. As soon as the representational codes are seriously subverted, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to identify human beings as either women or men.

In a less salient and more modest way, I had experienced the importance of the representation of one's gender in high school. I needed very strong glasses, was tall and muscular for my age, and my hair would never take shape of the pictures at the hairdresser. Moreover, I had a preference for strong language. To the boys, these traits made me a great pal, one of the guys almost—but not a nice girl to go out with. Smaller and more amiable girls without glasses made more desirable dates. As Dorothy Parker says, "Men don't make passes at girls who wear glasses." My attractiveness as a woman and as a date began right after I got contact lenses, to my delight and annoyance. The contacts didn't make me another person, or did they? Obviously, to others (men and women), the change in appearance made me more of a woman than I was before, and I noticed my own behavior and reactions changing too. It seemed as if looking more like a "true" woman made it easier for me to feel and act like one too, signaling that the representation of my femininity may have been as important as my "real" gender identity.

It is precisely this [lack of] distinction between the representation of gender and gender itself that I want to explore in this chapter.¹ To do so, I shall focus not only on individual representations of gender, as I have done until now, but also on the collectively produced and

received gender representations of the mass media. Using cross-dressing, heavy metal music, films such as *Tootsie* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Madonna, and soap operas as examples, I shall first ask what "gender" actually is. I shall then consider how gender is represented in the media, and finally I shall discuss how these representations are articulated in the gendered subjectivities of daily life. Postmodernism will be an inevitable part of this discussion, because of its denial of a distinction between representation and reality.

What Is Gender? Popular Music and Cross-Dressing

For many of us, gender may seem the most self-evident part of our identities. We know which box to check off when asked about our gender in questionnaires; we hardly ever doubt which door to take when going into a public restroom; when engaging in team sports, we know whether to sign up for the men's or women's teams. Very seldom do we explicitly question our own gender except maybe for some turbulent periods and moments in our lives, such as in adolescence or at transvestites' balls. Yet being men and women is not as obvious as it seems, as is shown, for instance, in the realms of popular music, the women's and gay rights movements, and cross-dressing.

Popular music, and MTV in particular, presents on a regular basis performers whose gender identities are unclear, often deliberately construed to bend the traditional conventions of gender. David Bowie and Grace Jones were the "gender-benders" of my generation, succeeded by a range of others such as Freddie Mercury, Boy George, Prince, Madonna, and, more recently, k. d. lang. In fact, notwithstanding the stereotypical portrayal of women and men in music videos (Vincent, Davis, & Bonuszowski, 1987), MTV seems to be the only part of mainstream culture in which subversions of gender are no exception or a sign of marginality. MTV, however, is firmly located in the sphere of the performing arts, in which disrupting conventions of gender, and a series of other norms, is not uncommon and in fact is often perceived as an ordinary ingredient of extravagant lifestyles supposedly common to artists. The performing arts are thus construed as such an exceptional sphere of life, a realm of fantasy, that the gender-bending taking place there does not necessarily or always undermine prevailing notions of gender.

If we look, for example, at the elements of femininity incorporated in the performances of many heavy metal bands, this point is paramount. Denski and Sholle (1992) argue that heavy metal music, despite its aggressive macho style, is heavily marked with feminine elements. Long, often curly, hair, makeup, hairless bodies, soft velvet clothing, and excessive jewelry all contradict the almost caricatured masculine language, movements, behavior, and aggressive heterosexuality of heavy metal performers. Two factors convince Denski and Sholle that the blurred gender codes in heavy metal cannot be seen as a subversion of traditional masculinity, but instead offer "a thinly disguised reproduction of traditional masculine roles of power and domination" (p. 59). First, heavy metal is also loaded with signs of aggressive male heterosexuality. One obvious sign of the "bad behavior" expected and required of heavy metal bands is to dominate and use women, as expressed, for instance, in lyrics, album covers, and offstage conduct. Second, in the reception of heavy metal there is no indication of any subversion of gender identities. On the contrary, heavy metal fans are found to detect more obvious gender-benders, such as Boy George, for their alleged lack of authenticity and their confused gender identities. The signs of femininity in heavy metal, then, are used to signify a rebellion against authority and dominant culture in general, rather than to show a dissatisfaction with gender dichotomies as we know them. Denski and Sholle conclude that the feminine elements in heavy metal function "as another sign of 'outrageousness' connected to the general theme of decadence [sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll] prevalent to hard rock performance, rather than a serious challenge to established gender binaries" (p. 58).

Gender has been much more seriously contested by the women's and gay rights movements and the theories emerging from these contexts. Although some feminist theories assume an essential gender identity, construing women and men as innately and essentially different, the majority assume gender to be a social and essentially constructed, something built on biological differences. In the words of the famous French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, "One is not born a woman, one is made a woman."² Thus our gender, like other aspects of our identity, is a product of circumstances, opportunities, and limitations, and is therefore instable.

There are several approaches to theorizing the construction of gender. Poststructuralist thinkers, who I find most helpful to my argument and who explain the ambiguities in gender discussed above

quite adequately, consider gender to be a discursive construct. In order to understand this notion properly we need to realize, following the French psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, that we become subjects through the acquisition of language. In other words, as we are born and raised into this world we learn to think, feel, and express ourselves with the linguistic means our society provides us. Of course, we can invent our own words and symbols, but nobody would understand us. Thus language sets sometimes powerful limits to our experiences of ourselves, others, and our surroundings. This is very important in thinking about how we communicate gender to each other, inside or outside of the media.

A different example of how gender is constructed rather than natural is shown by cross-dressing, which—contrary to the popular stereotype—is practiced more by heterosexual men than by homosexual men; a cross-dresser is not the same as a drag queen. Cross-dressing is actually such a widespread phenomenon that there are special clubs, groups, and magazines that offer opportunities for showing oneself, for mutual support, and for exchange of information and experiences.³ Although it may seem that cross-dressing is simply a way of dressing up, a temporary performance, an outward appearance, it also involves a change of behavior and in many cases a transformation of subjectivity. According to Garber (1992), there are hundreds of stories of lifelong cross-dressers who were only "found out" after their deaths, leaving their relatives with the question of who they "really" were—an irrelevant question, as I shall explain shortly. Garber recounts the example of jazz musician Billy Tipton, who was married and had three adopted sons, and who was discovered after his death in the late 1980s to have been a woman. Whereas his wife and children went on thinking of him as their husband and father, the media considered him to be a woman and kept speaking of "she" and "her," trying to pin Tipton's "true" gender down on the basis of his bodily features. What we see happening here, Garber claims, is that binary gender discourse is so powerful that it succeeds in overriding and denying identities that do not fit the dichotomy. The particular subjectivity of Billy Tipton and his counterparts, which cannot be defined as "man" or "woman" but rather constitutes a third space, is dismissed in favor of dominant gender discourse.

Stories like these may tell us several other things about the nature of gender, for instance, that the representation of gender may be more decisive than the "real" thing. In fact, in Billy Tipton's and other

similar cases the whole idea that a "true" or "real" gender exists is being undermined. (Re)presenting oneself as a woman or a man, regardless of one's body, apparently makes one into a woman or a man. As Judith Butler (1990) argues, "If a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse" (p. 136). *Representation* may therefore be a misleading term, because it still suggests that there is some reality or truth to be represented. Although it may be less misleading to think of gender as an "appearance" instead, this ignores the relation between the appearance or representation and subjectivity. The emphasis in this chapter on appearances, on performance and pretending, may falsely suggest that gender is just a role we play, as if we are continuously on stage creating and holding up a gender image, an image or role we can throw off as soon as we are offstage. But what are we left with then? Is there actually an offstage when it comes to gender?

The crucial question to ask, then, concerns the relation between gender as a product of discourse and human subjectivity, our sense of self. In the 1982 movie *Tootsie*, starring Dustin Hoffman as a cross-dressing actor, we can see quite literally how the two interact. Hoffman plays an unemployed actor, Michael Dorsey, who is desperate for work and decides to try his luck dressed as a middle-aged woman, Dorothy Michaels. Dorothy auditions for the role of hospital secretary in a daytime series and is at first turned down because the part requires a tough and aggressive woman, whereas Michael's impersonation is soft-spoken and gentle. At the snap of a finger Michael turns into a more forceful woman and is hired for the part. Until then, Dorothy is still a conscious creation of Michael, but slowly Dorothy becomes a true persona, not Michael or an impersonation of Michael but a new human being whose ideas, feelings, behaviors, and experiences have been formed in interaction with her social position as a woman and her surroundings, which—of course—treat her as a woman. We see Dorothy's subjectivity slowly evolving from the discourse in which she is caught. At the end of the film, when Dorothy has fallen in love with one of her co-actresses, whose father in turn has fallen in love with Dorothy, she decides she cannot bear fooling them anymore. Dorothy exposes Michael or Michael exposes Dorothy; at this point in the film the revelation can be seen as coming from both persons. By then, Dorothy has become a separate person to whom Michael is of little importance. She is missed by her friends and by the audience.

My brief excursions into cross-dressing and *Tootsie* are meant to illustrate the more abstract notions of poststructural gender theory, which states that true or essential identities do not exist but are the products of a discourse that makes us believe in them. The cross-dresser is the visible sign of the failure of that system, suggesting that gender is an act—performed not only by cross-dressers, but put up continuously by us all—albeit one with very real consequences. Whereas the metaphors of acting and appearance suggest that gender is something we can play or struggle with at will, which more and more people do, for that matter, it is also something that is ingrained in our sense of self, in our subjectivity. Our subjectivities are, after all, constituted—however fragmentary and temporary—in the discursive and symbolic realms of our lives.

At the level of individual gender identities we can thus consider the distinction between "real" gender and its representations an illusion, a result of dominant gender discourse in which most of us have come to identify ourselves within the binary opposition of being either man or woman. I shall now turn to the question of whether the collapse of a distinction between reality and representation also holds for the collective representations of gender in the mass media. If there is no reality of gender to represent, what is it that we see when we see gender in the media?

Media and Representation: Confirming and Undermining Gender Discourse

The representation of women and men in the media is often discussed in relation to its adequate reflection of reality. It is often said that women are underrepresented in media content compared with the 50% of the population they constitute. Alternatively, it is argued that in reality many more women work than we get to see or read about in media content. Likewise, men are overrepresented in the media and are rarely shown in home environments. Another argument deals with the definitions of femininity and masculinity presented to us in media content: For women, submissiveness, availability, and compliance are held up as ideals, and consumption is presented as the road to self-fulfillment; men, on the other hand, are presented as dominant, violent, and powerful. Thus many authors complain that the portray-

als of gender in the media are not representative of the positions of women and men in current societies (e.g., Cantor, 1978; Lazier-Smith, 1989). Apparently, those who make such statements conceive of gender as a more or less stable and easily identifiable distinction between women and men that ought to be represented correctly. As the above discussion on the unstable character of gender discourse shows, this is a problematic assumption. If a reality of gender does not exist, either at a subjective level or at a collective level, and we acknowledge only multiple and unstable representatives, it is impossible to conclude that media produce a "distorted" picture of gender. What, then, is it we see when we see gender in the media? Is it a representation without any relation to reality? Does it represent only itself, as would be argued by postmodernists such as Jean Baudrillard (1988)? Or is it a representation of something that has an existence outside of the media, maybe not a literal reflection of women's and men's lives and identities but maybe of modes of thinking and sets of norms and values, of current discourses, in other words? And how do media representations of gender relate to the gendered subjectivities and the representational practices of human beings in their daily lives?

Looking at the media representations of gender as expressions of dominant gender discourse—defined by its binary and hierarchical character—the abundance of research carried out in this area in the past decades suggests that gender is both confirmed and undermined by media texts. The research on stereotypes of women in the media (the portrayal of men has hardly been examined), for instance, can be interpreted not as evidence of a distorted picture of reality, but as support for two other hypotheses: that media confirm dominant gender discourse by presenting gender as a dichotomous phenomenon in which men are more important and powerful than women, and that research on stereotypes itself confirms dominant gender discourse as well by overlooking the inconsistencies and disruptions in the portrayal of gender. Let me elaborate this by briefly reviewing the results of research on stereotypes, drawing from summaries provided by M. Gallagher (1980) and Fejes (1992). Gallagher found depressing similarities between Western industrialized, Eastern communist, and Southern developing countries: Women are underrepresented in the media, in production as well as in content. They are shown in their roles in the family and rarely in the workplace. If they work, they work in low-status jobs without much power or authority. They tend to be young and conventionally pretty, defined in relation to their husbands,

fathers, sons, bosses, or other men, and portrayed as passive, indecisive, submissive, dependent, and so on. Fejes (1992) summarizes the rare examinations that have been made of the portrayals of men in the media and reports that the representations of men can be characterized as the opposite of the portrayals of women. From his and Gallagher's summaries we can concoct the dichotomy of gender as represented in the media:

women	men
underrepresentation	overrepresentation
family context	work context
low-status jobs	high-status positions
no authority	authority
no power	powerful
related to others	individual
passive	active
emotional	rational
dependent	independent
submissive	resistant
indecisive	resolute

This list could go on. Fejes (1992) concludes, "Based on these empirical studies, it is evident that men, as portrayed on adult television, do not deviate much from the traditional patriarchal notion of men and masculinity" (p. 12). Neither do women seem to be portrayed outside the discursive realm of patriarchy, supporting the hypothesis suggested earlier that media portrayals represent a dichotomous and hierarchical definition of gender.

We can all mention exceptions to the dichotomies presented above. Indeed, the 1980s and 1990s have confronted American television viewers with an unprecedented number of working women and mothering fathers (Cantor & Cantor, 1991), although a backlash has been noted more recently too (Faludi, 1991). Moreover, one wonders how ambivalent gender portrayals are registered in research projects like these. Would Freddie Mercury performing as a vacuum-cleaning housewife in Queen's video for the song "I Want to Break Free" be listed as a man or a woman? Either way, the researchers would miss the point of his/her character. Research on stereotypes rarely acknowledges such divergences and ambivalences; it represents gender discourse in the media as if it is as solid and impervious as a concrete wall, and

therewith reproduces the very phenomenon it wants to question—the dichotomous and hierarchical nature of gender. Other researchers have found it more useful to focus on the cracks in the wall, highlighting the contradictions in gender discourse to the extent that it seems to have become impossible to think of it as impervious and solid. Rather, it resembles an edifice that could come down any minute.

Feminist film scholar Jacky Byars (1991) has called such an approach an attempt at "recuperation," in which one examines media texts "looking for their internal contradictions and for the (potential) presence of strong feminine voices that resist patriarchal dominance" (p. 20). Thus one examines the struggles inherent to gender discourse in the media rather than the consensus, the negotiations rather than the agreement. Consider, for example, the classic 1953 Hollywood movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, starring Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe. Although a product of popular culture that often presents dominant gender discourse, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* can be seen as subversive text (Arbutnot & Seneca, 1982/1990). The two actresses portray strong, independent women who have ventured jointly on a boat trip to seek husbands. The heterosexual quest for romance might be the manifest narrative of the film, but underneath it is a story of resistance to male objectification and female love and friendship. There is a continuous tension between the romantic text and the feminist "subtext." Monroe and Russell are constructed as objects for the male gaze, but they always return the look, scanning their surroundings for appropriate husband material. In their dress and stature they resist sexual objectification, which is furthermore prevented by particular camera angles and lighting. The more important source of resistant pleasure, however, involves the friendship of the two women, which entails a genuine affection for each other despite displays of feelings of competition and jealousy over male courting; the women often look at each other lovingly, and frequently touch and caress one another. When they have finally succeeded in finding husbands, their double wedding scene can be seen as evidence that their matrimonial commitments are only superficial, and do not endanger the endurance of their friendship. Arbutnot and Seneca (1982/1990) note: "It is the tension between male objectification and women's resistance to that objectification that opens *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* to a feminist reading. It is the clear and celebrated connection between Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell that, for us, transforms *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* into a profoundly feminist text" (p. 123).

In fact, any media text, regardless of its manifest stereotypical character, can be interpreted against the grain of its dominant discourse. Media texts are *polysemic*, that is, they carry multiple meanings that do not produce a single, dominant discourse. Even blatant gender stereotypes may not be what they seem, as is tellingly illustrated by the American television comedy series *Married . . . with Children*. The series features a white, working-class nuclear family consisting of a husband, wife, daughter, and son. Peggy Bundy, the mother, is portrayed as the ever-consuming housewife, interested in her nail polish and her husband's paycheck only. Al portrays the quintessential lazy, good-for-nothing husband, a lousy provider who hates work, dislikes his family, and pretends watching television over almost anything. Sex is never on his mind, to the enormous frustration of his wife. Their teenage daughter is a proverbial sexy dumb blonde, their son a foul-mouthed adolescent with no respect for his parents. Gender and family stereotypes are taken to extremes in *Married . . . with Children* and become sources of laughter that expose and undermine dominant gender discourse instead of confirming and strengthening them.

Yet not every parody on gender, not every instance of gender-bending, necessarily has a subversive nature, as indicated by the analysis of heavy metal music mentioned earlier. The feminine elements in heavy metal performances are primarily used as easily manageable signs of rebellion against society in general, not as expressions of dissatisfaction with dominant gender discourse.

The relation between media representations of gender and the "reality" of gender does not concern an articulation with the material reality of gender roles and positions, as the research on stereotypes suggests. The issue is an articulation with the discursive reality of gender ranging from confirmation to subversion, none of them ever uncontested. Taking this one step further, radical postmodern thinkers would argue that the distinction between gender discourse in the media and gender discourse outside of the media is an artificial one, and that we are actually dealing with one inseparable, self-contained discursive realm. Reality and the media representation of gender have collapsed into a world of simulations or *simulacra*, as Baudrillard calls them. There are many easily understandable concrete phenomena that can be considered perfect examples of these simulacra. Let's look, for instance, at *Truth or Dare*, Madonna's autobiographical documentary of her Blonde Ambition Tour.

The film presents the performance of Madonna's show in a number of cities throughout the world, shows what is going on backstage, and reveals parts of Madonna's life offstage. The backstage and offstage scenes are in black and white and the show elements are in color, suggesting a clear distinction between Madonna's public performance and her private life. However, the differences between the color and black-and-white scenes gradually lose importance, and by the end of the film we are not so sure anymore of any relevant distinctions among onstage, backstage, and offstage (Pribram, 1993).

The question of whether Madonna really shows her true self to the audience has dominated popular and critical reception of the film. The most widespread conclusion seems to be that *Truth or Dare* is just another example of Madonna's capacity to control her image, that it does not tell us anything about her real self. In such comments the implicit assumption is, again, that there is a fundamental difference between representation and reality, that there is a true, core identity to be found and revealed after all the masks and disguises have been peeled away. The more postmodern interpretation, that there is no fundamental distinction between representation and reality, that "what you see is what you get," that there is nothing beyond the appearance, is made—although unwillingly—in the movie by Warren Beatty, Madonna's lover at the time. At some point, Madonna is checked by a doctor because of problems with her voice. While the doctor is examining her throat, the camera keeps rolling, and Beatty wonders aloud whether this should be filmed too. In a scene often commented on, Beatty then exclaims, both desperately and critically: "Turn the camera off! She doesn't want to live off camera, much less talk. There is nothing to say off camera. Why would you say something if it's off camera? What point is there of existing?" Even Beatty, who would be one of the few to know, cannot find another—supposedly more authentic—Madonna than the public person.

The unsuccessful attempts of fans, critics, and other parties to pin down the "genuine" Madonna resemble the confusion incited by cross-dressers, who also cannot be defined in terms of an "authentic" identity and also pose the question of the relation between the appearance and the "real." As in the cross-dressers' case, to maintain the illusion that there is something more important beyond the appearance is to deny the relevance and the value of the appearance itself. Whereas cross-dressers undermine the dichotomy of gender—one is either man or woman—and present us with a third possibility, the

Madonna phenomenon undermines another dichotomy—between reality and representation—and suggests a third option: reality as representation or appearance; a simulation or "simulacrum," as Baudrillard has called it.

If one sees her in this way, she can then be received at surface value, confusions and contradictions intact. That is, there is no definitive "real," no authentic Madonna, beyond the personal we already know through her various incarnations, guises, and forms. Following Baudrillard, if there is no authentic, then the appearances themselves, by displacing the authentic, become real (or, to use his term, the hyperreal). (Patriam, 1993, p. 202)

The "hyperreal" has become a much more ordinary phenomenon than we may think at first sight. The Madonna phenomenon is not the only easily available example of a simulacrum. In the world of politics and journalism, simulacra also exist abundantly in the form of "pseudoevents," events especially set up for media coverage and meaningless without coverage. The many contradictions and uncertainties in contemporary gender discourse in the media may also suggest that there is no definite relation to "real" gender discourse anymore, that the multifaceted appearance of gender is the relevant phenomenon instead. Advertising, for instance, is a genre that has begun to explore the ambivalence of gender. Wernick (1991) contends that whereas the appearances of women and men in advertising used to signify dominant dichotomous gender discourse, more and more these appearances have been exploited to signify unexpected themes. Male bodies, for instance, are often constructed as passive objects of the gaze of heterosexual (and homosexual) audiences. Female bodies may be used to point at power, authority, and control. Wernick contends that the ultimate consequence of this interchangeability is that gender has become an arbitrary sign in advertising, without any direct relation to its referent in real life, although, as we have seen, this referent is not an unproblematic stable phenomenon either.

One may conclude, then, that the representation of gender in the media is not a representation at all, for there is no reality to which it refers—or rather this reality is so contradictory and ambiguous that any attempt to pin it down is futile. Gender discourse in the media, then, should be thought of in postmodern terms of appearance rather than representation. It is a separate phenomenon that calls for attention to itself rather than to the alleged but nonexistent truth behind

it. This is not to say that gender as appearance in the media has nothing to do with reality, only that we should look for its articulation on a different plane. The question is not how gender in the media represents reality, but how it functions in reality, in particular, how it is articulated with the gendered subjectivities of human beings in their daily lives. Given that, as I have argued above, our subjectivity is constituted in language, the hyperreal of the media is an inevitable part of the discursive realm of gender in which we are taken up, interacting not only with other discourses such as those of sexuality and ethnicity but also with the social and material conditions of daily life. Postmodernism that follows Baudrillard has little to say about such issues and is, according to its critics, little more than an elitist analysis of aesthetic forms denying the "social materialism" of the hyperreal, that is, the question of how it is part of everyday life (Fiske, 1991).

Media, Gender, and Everyday Life

Most research on the use and interpretation of media in everyday life suffers from the same dichotomization of gender as the research on stereotypes and dominant gender discourse in general. Take, for example, research on the popularity of television soap operas. Much of it is inspired by the quantitative fact that women are the most avid viewers of soaps; this fact is seen to originate in soap operas' centrality of themes and values associated with the private sphere. The focus on women as protagonists, on their rational and calculated actions, and on their mischievous attitudes toward male power form some of the sources of pleasure for the female audience. Further pleasures stem from the ability of soaps to evoke a mode of reception that is simultaneously critical and involved. The particular scheduling of daytime soaps ensures that the audience will consist of housewives and others working outside of the mainstream daytime labor market (e.g., Brown, 1990; Seiter, Borchers, Kreuzner, & Warth, 1991).

Concealed but straightforward causal models are thus employed; researchers assume that the identifications enabled by the female characters of soaps are important reasons for their popularity among women. In other words, most reception analysis assume that first you are a woman or a man, and then you like soaps and romances or sports and documentaries. Such a notion of gender construes the concept

again as a relatively constraint and consistent feature of human identity. However, as discussed earlier, being a "woman" or a "man" only seems to provide a stable and uncontested identity. Even within dominant gender discourse, there are still many distinct and contradictory subject positions to take up. It may even seem as if in each social situation an appropriate gender identity has to be established and expressed anew. As I have noted, in adolescence gender insecurity may be most salient and painful, and in this respect gender discourse in the media, as presented by Madonna, among others, may be most relevant. "Adolescents are themselves trying out various identities, and Madonna's constant alteration may well satisfy deep needs for self-experimentation, deep needs to move beyond the constraints of given gender sign systems" (Kaplan, 1993, p. 158).

Ian Ang's (1990) essay about the "feminization" pleasures of soaps can serve as a further illustration. She argues that in the never-ending process of feminization—constructing the appropriate feminine identity—the female characters of soap operas offer fantasy modes of femininity that enable viewers to try out different subjectivities without the risks involved in real life. "In fantasy and fiction, however, there is no punishment for whatever identity one takes up, no matter how headstrong or destructive; there will be no retribution, no defeat will ensue" (p. 86). Thus possibilities for identification do not form the source of female pleasure in soaps, but precisely the opposite: The options for experimenting with unknown and extreme identities make soaps enjoyable. Gender does not precede media reception and genre preference, but almost the reverse. A particular mode of reception is part of the ongoing construction of gender. In other words, "gender identities—feminine and masculine subjectivities—are constructed in the practices of everyday life in which media consumption is subsumed" (Ang & Hermes, 1991, p. 308).

Despite its potential status as hyperreal, media representations of gender discourse are relevant to the realities of daily life because they have become part of our subjectivity by offering modes of understanding and representing ourselves. They enable us to explore our multiple subjectivities and the differential investments we may have in several gendered subject positions, an investment being "something between emotional commitment and a vested interest, in the relative power [satisfaction, reward, payoff] which that position promises [but does not necessarily fulfill]" (De Lauretis, 1987, p. 16). It is precisely because of these differential investments that apparently subversive

elements of gender-bending—as present, for instance, in the performance of heavy metal bands—do not produce a subversion of dominant gender discourse. Heavy metal fans, being primarily insecure adolescent boys, have too much to lose by admitting insecurities of gender (Denski & Sholle, 1992, p. 53). Thus, whereas the articulation of gender discourse in the media with the formation of subjectivity in everyday life may take on a subversive character, it may just as well confirm the dominant modes of thinking about gender as dichotomous and hierarchical. As Jake Hermes (1993) suggests, popular culture "may be used to realign oneself with dominant identities" (p. 209).

Having come to the end of this chapter, it seems as if we are left with more questions and uncertainties than answers. To summarize somewhat crudely: Gender appears to be an unstable phenomenon only ostensibly pinned down in the dominant discourse of binary and hierarchical gender relations, but in fact continuously escaping categorization and definition. Media representations seem to miss direct referents in reality and represent not much more than themselves. The articulation of these representations with gendered subjectivities in daily life may amount to different things depending on people's differential investments in gender identities, resulting in the subversion as well as the confirmation of dominant gender discourse. The emphasis on the unstable character of gender and the continuous negotiation taking place in and with media texts may suggest that it is a volatile, almost meaningless category that can be filled with meaning according to individual preferences, social conditions, cultural peculiarities, or historical contingencies. It may obscure the power relations in which gender is embedded, and the very terminology of "gender" may conceal that "masculinity" often implies a discourse of power and centrality, whereas "femininity" is more commonly related to powerlessness and marginality. Looking at gender from this perspective, the instabilities noted in this chapter are marginal phenomena only: a long way from the situation in which it would be impossible to speak of "gender" at all. That would possibly qualify as a poststructuralist utopia in which "freedom lies in our capacity to discover the historical links between certain modes of self-understanding and modes of domination, and to resist the ways in which we have already been classified and identified by dominant discourses" (Sawicki, 1991, p. 43). After all, wouldn't it be wonderful if life was one big transvestites' ball?

Further Questions

1. Do media programs push boys and men to think they should be tough and always in control of their feelings? If so, are the media effective in this, and in which ways?
2. How do you rate the impacts of children's toys on the way boys and girls begin to understand the social meanings of their genders? Do boys always play with imitation guns and girls with dolls?
3. In which sectors of the media industry are women most likely to be employed? At which levels of authority? If women had more power within the media industry, would it change the industry's gender portrayals?

Notes

1. In this chapter I draw on some ideas and phrases from my book *Feminist Media Studies* (Zaonen, 1994).
2. It is an interesting example of gender difference to notice the change in meaning when applying De Beauvoir's (1972, p. 295) statement to the male case: "One is not born a man, one is made a man." Associations of the army and other places where "men are made" come to mind, suggesting that being made into a woman is a very different process from being made into a man.
3. Indicative of current gender relations is that the male-to-female cross-dresser is not only a more common phenomenon, but also much better served by support groups, shops, magazines, and so on.

19 Advertising and Consumer Culture

DOUGLAS KELLNER

Some critical analysts focus mainly on the political economy of media, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 of this volume. Others concentrate overwhelmingly on cultural studies, as in this section. Kellner tries to fuse these perspectives together, examining not just the economic basis of U.S. broadcasting and the press—advertising—but also advertising's impact in creating a consumerist culture that seems at times to envelop us all.

The intellectual source of much of his critique is a group of German intellectuals who were forced into exile, mainly to the United States, by the Nazis' accession to power in 1933. Based originally at a short-lived research institute at Frankfurt University, they are the founders of what has become known as the Frankfurt school of critical theory. Their view of contemporary mass culture has been highly influential since. They are noted for their insistence on how mass-produced contemporary culture provides us with substitutes for genuine experience, for love, for curiosity of the mind, on how it manipulates our anxieties about ourselves, and on how it caters to a fraction of our intelligence and effectively sells us short as human beings.

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