

The Politics of Being a Woman

The Politics of Being a Woman

**Feminism, Media and
21st Century Popular Culture**

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palgrave
macmillan



Selection, introduction, conclusion and editorial matter © Heather Savigny and Helen Warner 2015

Foreword © Liesbet Van Zoonen 2015

Afterword © Kat Banyard 2015

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2015 978-137-38465-2

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First published 2015 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-349-48098-2 ISBN 978-1-137-38466-9 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137384669

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing

processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

To Sam, Simon & Lewis

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Foreword

A book like the one you are about to read is always both an inspiration and a frustration. An inspiration because it shows how feminist media studies, after some 40 years of existence, is a vibrant research field that never ceases to produce solid, interesting and engaged academic work. A frustration because much of that same work demonstrates a worrying lack of change in its objects of study, the media. Already in 1978, American scholars Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels and James Benét collected a number of studies about women and media under the title *Hearth & Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*. They said they were interested in ‘the progress we are making toward the full social equality of women in this society’ and that ‘most people believe the media have an influence’ (p. v). They acknowledged that the experts are undecided about how big this influence is and how it works exactly, and they introduced their book as an encouragement to others to study ‘the interaction between the media and public opinion in the press for equality between the sexes’ (p. vi). The chapters in the book covered analyses of women’s images in television, women’s magazines and newspapers, and studies of the effects of sexist media on children. At the end, a bibliography was included which showed how the study of women and media began in concert with the emergence of the second wave women’s movement. Many of the early 1970s studies were initiated by the National Organisation of Women.

Looking back at the 1978 collection we see, predictably, quite a lot of change: we speak, nowadays, of gender rather than of women; we prefer to speak of gender as ‘performance’ and don’t see it simply as the end product of early age sex role socialisation; we acknowledge, through the concept of intersectionality, that gender is not the only dimension of identity that produces exclusion and oppression and have become sensitive to sexuality and ethnicity, and – to a lesser extent – to disability and religion (attention to class remains still very much a British thing). Words like ‘articulation’ or ‘bricolage’ point at the fact that we no longer assume simple and direct effects of sexist media on women’s and girls’ lives but recognise, instead,

that women actively use and interpret their media, making them relevant to their own beliefs and everyday practices. 'Text' instead of 'content' is the word that clarifies that we *read* our media and are not simply overwhelmed by them. Our theories and concepts, in sum, have changed tremendously. The media we study have changed too; we have witnessed an explosion of new digital and mobile forms all captured under the heading of 'the internet', while no old media have disappeared (although they have changed a lot in themselves). We have seen a new entertainment industry emerge that has become bigger than Hollywood and that produces games that vary from high quality visual and narrative challenges to simple swap and play. And in contrast to the multi-million dollar media industries, we have seen an upsurge of personal media production, through social media status updates, selfies, blog posts, life logs or webcam diaries. No wonder that many an author claims nowadays that we live *in* or *through* media (Deuze, 2012) and that we can no longer distinguish them as separate factors in our lives; like a fish cannot recognise the water it lives in, we can no longer distinguish the media from ourselves (as McLuhan claimed already in the early sixties of the last century).

Such a metaphor seems to move the field of feminist media studies to a much wider focus on the way our overall symbolic environment is constructed, regardless of the particular media through which this takes place. This move is reflected in the approach many of the authors contributing to the volume at hand take: they focus on the way politicians' wives, Lady Gaga, Madonna or other female celebrities are represented in an array of media, and demonstrate how these representations together construct intertextual cultural personas. It is such a celebrity persona rather than specific media content that carries and expresses the discourses of femininity through which we live; traditional, as the chapters show, when it comes to politicians' wives and the majority of female pop, television and movie stars, more contested in the case of Madonna and Lady Gaga.

The celebrity culture of which Madonna and Lady Gaga are only a few of the leading icons, has brought the discussion of positive role models for women and girls back on the feminist and wider public agenda. In 1978, Gaye Tuchman introduced, on the basis of the then existing research, the notion of 'symbolic annihilation' of women and girls in the media, meaning that media either make women invisible, or portray them as incompetent. In 21st century celebrity

culture, invisibility is no longer an issue, and the portrayal of incompetence has changed in the sense that women's competence with respect to body, beauty and hyper-heterosexuality is now the media discourse in which we have to live our lives. Abundant are the examples of young women whom we could admire for the way they use their bodies to build a position of individual power, with Beyoncé and Miley Cyrus possibly topping the list.

Paradoxically, that mainstream culture contains its own criticism; governments and professional organisations have produced reports and policies against the sexualisation of culture, and the cultural industries themselves eagerly produce stories and images that emphasise the artificial and constructed nature of current ideals of sexy femininity. The schizophrenic case of Dove, a product line for body care, is typical: Dove promotes its products using models of diverse age, ethnicity and size. Under the slogan of 'real beauty' it has produced videos that reveal the tricks of photo-shopping in advertising, and criticise the effects this has on young girls. It also runs a project for girls' 'self-esteem'. Yet, its parent company Unilever also produces the deeply sexist campaigns for its men's deodorant Axe, and the deeply racist campaign for its skin-whitening cream Fair and Lovely. The ultimate proof of the opportunistic logic of capitalism is that Unilever acquired both the Slim-Fast company and Ben and Jerry's ice-cream on the same day.¹ There are many examples like this: a month after Australian movie star Nicole Kidman became ambassador for the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and criticised Hollywood's sexualised portrayal of women in her inaugural speech, she appeared on the cover of *Gentleman's Quarterly* dressed in black lingerie only.²

There is quite a bit of attention to such paradoxes in this volume; not only in the analysis of actual texts (for instance the criticism implicit in *Mad Men's* celebration of 1950s masculinity), but especially in the analysis of audience responses to celebrities and other instances of popular culture. It seems that many, probably most, of us are aware of the nasty tricks that pop culture plays us; girls as young as twelve appear to understand why Britney Spears and Miley Cyrus all of a sudden turn to the performance of sexy (Duits and Van Romondt Vis, 2009), and appear to be highly critical of this. Time and again, and in the chapters here too, it turns out that mothers, the role-models at arm's length, are crucial in the negotiation of such

images. To return to the fish and the water metaphor, we recognise our water because mothers teach us how and where to swim in the vast seas of gender discourse.

But who helps us to get out of the water altogether? Dove and its corporate companions may tell us that we need to acknowledge ‘real beauty’, but that is still a discourse about beauty, and not about strength, independence, creativity, intelligence, compassion, or whatever else that is not about the appearance of our bodies. In Gaye Tuchman’s times there was the sisterhood (how helpful family metaphors are) of the women’s movement to offer such alternatives, but where are the feminists these days and what alternatives do they offer? A group like *Femen*, originating in the Ukraine but now operating in many other countries as well, also keep within the woman = body = beauty framework, be it that they use their body and their bare breasts as means of aggressive protest thus disabling and challenging the traditional male gaze. But they keep us in the water, instead of getting us on land where we belong (after all, we are not fish).

What is feminism and how to be a feminist, are questions that have come back through the actions of *Femen*, but also through a range of other initiatives like the *Everyday Sexism* project which uses social media to ‘record stories of sexism faced on a daily basis, by ordinary women, in ordinary places. To show that sexism exists in abundance in the UK workplace and that it is very far from being a problem we no longer need to discuss.’³ If we would dig deeper into the wide and diverse range of current social media, we would find a wealth of feminist activity that belies the mainstream notion that feminism is dead. Some even claim social media is offering the means for a fourth wave of feminism (e.g. Munro, 2013; Schuster, 2013). We would also find a vehement backlash on those same social media by trolls, bullies and other griefers who will try to silence every woman, and especially those calling themselves feminist, as – among others – media and game critic Anita Sarkeesian of *Feminist Frequency* can testify.⁴ In the face of all such hate, against feminists, against women with brains, but effortlessly against all other women as well, to say one is not a feminist (but...) is the act of a coward. It is a brave and original twitch of this volume, therefore, that the editors asked all authors to claim their kind of feminism and begin their chapter with finishing the sentence “I am a feminist because ...” and “I am

a feminist if ...". There is no hiding behind overly complex theoretical jargon here, but a straightforward imposition of the politics of feminist media research. And rightly so. I am a feminist because only then I can be many women at the same time.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of those who have engaged with this project and made it so much fun to be involved with. To all our feminists at the back of the book and to all who have taken the time to engage with the intellectual content in what follows. In particular we would like to thank the reviewers, Jenny Alexander, Jenny Cooper, Simon Gerrard, Rowan Landis, Sam Sleight, Lewis Swift, Lynne Warner, Dan Weissman, Rowan Whiteside, Shelley Thompson, Amber Burton, Nathan Farrell, Anna Feigenbaum, Dan Jackson, David McQueen, Barry Richards and Pawel Surowiec, all of the 'brown bag' friends and colleagues in the Media School at Bournemouth University, the University of East Anglia Feminist Society and ResNet. A special thanks goes to Liesbet Van Zoonen and Kat Banyard for taking time out of their busy schedules to support us. We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. And to Felicity and Chris, Geetha and the copy editors and all at Palgrave Macmillan – thank you for being such a pleasure to work with.

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Notes

1. All examples taken from *The Illusionists*, a documentary in the making about beauty ideals, <http://theillusionists.org/2013/04/the-problem-with-dove/>, last accessed April 24, 2014.
2. I wrote about this in the preface to Krijnen, Alvares and Van Bauwel (2011).
3. <http://everydaysexism.com/>, last accessed April 24, 2014.
4. <http://femfreq.tumblr.com/post/24474432605/harassment-misogyny-and-silencing-on-youtube>, last accessed April 24, 2014.