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Introduction: Gender and Representation

What is Sex? What is Gender?

A few years ago a rather blunt acquaintance announced that he thought gender studies was a pointless discipline and a complete waste of time. ‘After all,’ he said, ‘we are all either male or female. What is there to discuss?’ Notwithstanding that there actually is quite a lot to discuss about whether bodies are male or female, this unenlightened acquaintance was making a commonplace error in that he was confusing gender with sex.

The foundation of gender studies is the distinction that we can draw between sex and gender. ‘Sex’ refers to the description of chromosomal, anatomical sex – male and female. In other words, sex is biological. Although there are cases of bodies which are intersexed, a body’s sex can, for the most part, be (relatively) easily determined as it is decided by chromosomal, anatomical detail.

Gender, unlike sex, is not biological but cultural. ‘Gender’ refers to masculinity and femininity and describes learned patterns of behaviour or performance. Therefore, what makes a person male or female is grounded in biology and, in that respect, is universal. How a person performs or does masculinity and femininity is cultural and as such may vary according to culture or context. What is deemed appropriate femininity or masculinity in one age or culture may be entirely different from the performance expected of women or men in contemporary, Western culture. To use some obvious examples, in 18th-century Western culture it was deemed appropriate for both sexes, male and female, especially people of the higher social echelons, to wear heavy, lead-based make-up and voluminous powdered wigs. In other words, for a man to wear obvious make-up was considered an appropriate performance of masculinity within that specific cultural context. Similarly, men would wear extremely ornate clothes, often exposing their legs, wear high heels and move in a theatrical, flamboyant fashion. This was considered appropriate masculinity. In contemporary culture, such a
performance would usually be considered feminine and inappropriate for a male body.

The point is that these ideas of what makes appropriate masculinity and appropriate femininity do not simply happen. We don’t automatically know how to behave and represent ourselves simply because of our biological sex. Instead, we learn acceptable patterns of behaviour from our culture. This is why, when people ask about the gender of a newborn baby, they are asking an inappropriate question. Babies are not gendered. They are certainly sexed (male or female), but because they have had no interaction with culture they are not yet performing gender. In a similar fashion, it would be ridiculous to ask about a baby’s social class identification as, once again, social class is a cultural construct which comes from integration within a cultural regime.

However, as we all know, many parents evidence a desire to make the baby’s gender visible to everyone – not least in the colour coding of the baby’s clothes. A boy should be dressed in blue and a girl in pink – or so culture tells us. This almost paranoid obsession with gendering the baby, making the baby’s gender evident for everyone to see, is the first step in a lifelong commitment to maintaining gender propriety. Without necessarily being fully conscious of it, parents police their children’s gender, teaching them from an early age what is deemed appropriate femininity and masculinity. For example, while both boys and girls may be given toy dolls to play with the girl’s dolls will either be babies, thus teaching her the role of maternal nurturing, or fashion dolls (the most famous is ‘Barbie’) with which the girl child will learn the importance of grooming and making-up the body. The boy child will also be given dolls to play with but his will be action dolls – soldiers or super-heroes – with which he will be encouraged to dramatise fights and battles. Commonplace occurrences in public playgrounds (the one described here was witnessed by one of the authors of this book) exemplify this kind of gender socialisation. Two children – a boy and a girl – have dolls to play with. The boy is playing with his action figures and dramatising a veritable blood-bath in which one action figure pulverises the other, to the point where the victorious doll is jumping on the loser doll – the boy smashing the doll up and down to crush the losing doll to a pulp. The mother is witnessed applauding this and telling her son how wonderful he is. The female child had been playing happily with her baby doll (it was one of those dolls that can suck, with loud squelches, on a dummy) but, when the girl saw the ‘fun’ of her brother’s game, she wanted to join in with the fighting and clobbering of his dolls. The mother, however, intervened
to stop this and the girl child was reminded that she should play with her suckling baby doll instead.

This policing of strict gender roles continues into educational establishments where school playgrounds become veritable courtrooms, where appropriate gender roles are judged. This is particularly the case in relation to masculinity in which schoolboys will viciously (often brutally) police performances of masculinity in their peers. Any schoolboy who dares to perform something which is identified as feminine risks suffering the most intense bullying as his colleagues attempt to redirect him to the ‘appropriate’ gender role (see Chapter 2).

The key point here is that we all learn from various cultural institutions – family, friends, school – how to perform masculinity (if we are sexed as male) and how to perform femininity (if we are sexed as female). Ideas of masculinity and femininity do not just happen – they do not just automatically come from inside us – rather, we learn these from culture.

However, a great many people (and we would argue that this is the majority of the population who have not taken a gender studies course) believe that gender is simply inherent or innate. A stock phrase in Western culture is ‘boys will be boys’ or ‘girls will be girls’. It is believed that feminine acts simply happen because a body is female while male bodies will automatically perform masculinity. Culture consistently reduces culturally acquired gender performances to simple biology.

Let’s take an interesting example here. For many years, women were described as the ‘gentle sex’ who were delicate and more fragile than men. This was most obvious when we considered the act of swooning or passing out at times of anxiety or crisis. This was particularly popular in the Victorian era when women were, apparently, always swooning and fainting. This was explained by a medical discourse which diagnosed these feminine acts as something inherent in the female body. These were known as acts of hysteria and were deemed to be the direct result of having a female body. The Greek word for ‘womb’ is *hysteron* and ‘hyster-ia’ means a wandering or loose movement of the womb. The theory was that when a woman became hysterical, her womb had started to move about the body and required the intervention of the (somewhat vile) ‘smelling salts’ to drive the ill-disciplined womb back down into the right place. Hence we have endless representations in art and period costume dramas of swooning women crying out for their smelling salts. The key point here is that this feminine act of hysteria/swooning was deemed an essential aspect of femininity – it happened because a woman was sexed as female and had a womb.
However, the real reason why women were swooning and fainting had absolutely nothing to do with their sex – the anatomical details of their bodies – but instead was purely cultural. The culprit for many of the cases of Victorian swooning was, as is now widely known, the corset. This unpleasant device was used to enhance the woman’s waist by lacing her up tightly, in what was basically a very broad whalebone belt, so that her waist size was greatly diminished. This created the highly fashionable hourglass figure. The problem, however, was that her diaphragm was greatly constricted and she could barely draw a breath, let alone a full lung of air, resulting in swooning and fainting. They were ‘delicate’ or the ‘gentle sex’ because they could barely breathe let alone engage in strenuous activity. The key point about the fashion of Victorian corsetry is that it demonstrates how something which society deemed to be essentially feminine – women were thought to be naturally delicate and given to swooning – was, in fact, a cultural construct created by the practice/regime of wearing tight corsets. The swooning Victorian woman is a prime example of how society attempts to reduce a cultural practice to a sexed, biological trait.

Although we no longer have such extreme acts as corseting bodies (apparently the corset could cause all sorts of damage to the constricted internal organs – often squashing them or causing them to dislodge from their correct place) we do still continue to ‘excuse’ cultural practices by deeming them to be biological traits. For example, the phrase ‘boys will be boys’ is generally used to excuse male violence and acts of physical aggression, such as when two teenage schoolboys leave each other with black eyes and bloody noses. One common ‘biological’ account for this stems from the fact that boys have more testosterone than girls and that testosterone is thought to inspire aggression. However, although it is correct that hormonal changes in the body can have a direct effect upon a person’s mood, aggressive acts are something which a young male learns. It is true that the pubescent boy’s burgeoning levels of testosterone do, indeed, affect his mood and sense of temperament, but the point is that he is more likely to manifest these emotional changes through acts of violence because he has learned to express himself in this way from cultural activities that are deemed appropriate for a man (as in the case of the action dolls usually given to a little boy). If a woman is distraught or anxious, her hormones in a state of flux, she is more likely to demonstrate this anxiety through crying or weeping because she has learned from culture that crying is the appropriate way for a woman to demonstrate distress or anxiety. However, a boy is taught from an early age that men are not supposed
to cry so the only outlet which is available for his surge of hormonal emotion is the typical act of violence which will, of course, be explained by recourse to biological make-up: ‘boys will be boys’.

To summarise the main points: ‘sex’ refers to male/female and is grounded in biological, anatomical details. ‘Gender’ refers to masculinity/femininity and describes how a person acts out specific performances or roles which are deemed, by contemporary culture, to be appropriate for male or female bodies. Of course, it is the very fact that gender is cultural, rather than fixed by biology, which makes it such a precarious identification and why we learn that we must constantly worry about our gender performances in everything we do. Adult life is a constant stream of anxiety related to our gender performance: am I dressed appropriately? Am I too feminine or too masculine? How do I sit in a public place such as a bus or a train? If I’m a man should I dominate the space and sit with my legs apart? If I’m a woman should I keep my legs together and contract into the space made available? Underpinning all of this for many of us are the dark memories of schoolyards in which young girls are ostracised from their peers for liking ‘masculine’ sports and boys are bullied and even beaten up because they like singing or the performing arts.

Arguably, this demonstrates that gender studies, far from being a ‘waste of time’, should actually be mandatory on the National Curriculum and perhaps we would then have much less schoolyard bullying. But we may have a few years to wait for that.

**Gender and Representation**

In the previous section we have argued that our ideas of what it means to be masculine or feminine do not simply happen because of our biological sex but are formed through cultural activities/practices. We learn what is deemed appropriate femininity or masculinity from parents, friends, social engagements and school. However, there is another highly influential cultural practice within Western culture: the media. Indeed, if there is one source where we really learn what is ‘appropriate’ masculinity or femininity it is through media representations.

We live in a world where we are assailed by media representations. Television, advertising, film, the press, the internet and new technologies which allow us to view images everywhere, such as the iPhone, all ensure that we are enthralled by media images. For many of us, our
understanding and learning of what is deemed appropriate femininity or masculinity is enhanced and ensured through media representations.

When thinking critically about media representations we have two key areas which we need to bear in mind. Firstly, representation is always re-presentation. In other words, the images that we see are not simply a reflection or a mirror of the world but are constructs – images which have been built or produced. As such, representations are never ‘innocent’, they never simply happen, but are always constructed in accordance with specific politics or ideologies. The producer of the image has coded the imagery within the text in order to produce specific meanings and often these meanings are not simply the vision of the producer but are in accordance with dominant ideologies of the period. For example, let’s take a very commonplace representation, an image which most people will be familiar with: the wedding photograph.

Firstly, we should stress that this is a re-presentation of a happy, newly formed alliance between two families. Marriage is not only a bonding of two people but the union of two different family groups. Both sides of the family are re-presented as joyous on this wedding day. In reality there may be some family members who were feeling distinctly unwell or perhaps despised the person they are standing beside. The key point, though, is that they are re-presented as happy on this joyous occasion. Another issue to remember in representation studies is that a particular type (or genre) of image will always adhere to specific conventions which allow the viewer to make sense of that image. For example, the bride and groom are positioned at the centre of the image: this is a generic expectation which allows the spectator to identify the people represented. Even though the bridesmaid’s dress looks similar to the bride’s dress, we are able to identify the bride because she is centre stage.

However, even though this is a simple, everyday image there is a specific set of politics being expressed in the coding of the image. Marriage is about the bonding of a heterosexual couple and it is anticipated that this couple will produce a family of their own and that their children will, in turn, go on to marry and produce a family. If we look closely at the coding of the image, we can see that this specific politics of heterosexuality is expressed in the iconography. The little flower girl and page boy stand directly in front of the wedding party and look like mini-versions of the bride and groom. This mini-version of the happy couple is not only suggesting the importance that culture places upon producing children within a marriage but also indicates that it is
expected that these children will then progress to marry as well and produce children of their own. Even though this is a simple, everyday image, it emphasises and affirms the politics of heterosexuality, marriage and reproduction.

This little example is helpful for simply stressing the political importance of representation in contemporary culture. For us, the authors, and for those who work in the critical study of media and culture, one of the least helpful remarks that someone can say is the dismissive phrase ‘it’s only a representation’ or ‘it’s only a film/TV programme’. Media images not only represent specific ideologies but help to support these ideologies in contemporary culture. This is most important when we consider the representation of gender in the media. The media gives us a sense of what it means to be masculine or feminine and how we should enact these performances. Although there are more representations now in contemporary media of people who challenge or ‘queer’ traditional gender performances (see Chapter 3), the media is still emphatic in adhering to a strict regime of traditional gender in the majority of its representations.

This brings us to the second key aspect which must be remembered when we consider media representations: the sense of representation as representative of a specific group; an image which is ‘standing in for’ a specific group of people. To use another commonplace example: on every university degree course there will be a student who is entitled ‘the student rep’. This student represents or stands in for the entire student body. He or she is the representation of the students’ views/opinions at faculty meetings. Obviously, this is a very important job as the student rep can distinctly colour and influence the perception that the faculty has of the entire student community. For example, if the student rep is combative and rude, then this will influence the perception that the faculty have of the whole student body. In other words, this one student has to bear the burden of representation in that he or she is standing in for the entire student community.

This is particularly important when we consider representations in the media, especially when we consider that a number of representations may be of small, minority groups which are not widely known. The representation of disability is a key example in that many of the spectators may never have met anyone with the specific disability that is represented on the screen. Therefore, the only source of information which that spectator has to go on – his or her whole perception of what it means to identify with that specific disability – is shaped by the media representation. Another important example is the representation of
gays and lesbians in the media given that there may well be spectators who have absolutely no knowledge of gay culture and so simply believe that the representations they see are reality.

Obviously, these are two quite specific examples and the representation of gender is not entirely comparable given that, unless the spectator is living on a desert island, he or she will encounter men and women on a daily basis. If the spectator watches an image of a hysterical, screeching woman, he or she will negotiate that image in relation to the actual women that he or she is meeting on a daily basis. Unlike, say, the representation of a person with cerebral palsy, the spectator will have met actual women and may have more appreciation of the ways that the representation is working in relation to some specific set of narrative conventions or genre expectations. In this way gender representations do not bear quite the same ‘burden’ of representation as those of other marginalised groups.

Nevertheless, this is not to say that media representations are not highly influential. For instance they convey an idea of what is deemed to be ‘desirable’ gender to the spectator. The male hero of the Hollywood film will always conform to a specific type of masculinity. It is very rare, for example, to find an effeminate man in the role of the Hollywood hero. However, it is not at all rare to find the evil villain of the film represented as effeminate and so imparting a specific gender politics: male effeminacy is evil, undesirable and, like the villain of the film, should be destroyed. In other words, the media gives us a sense of what gender performances are deemed acceptable and, more importantly, desirable, and which should be avoided.

A key strategy within media representation is the technique known as ‘stereotyping’. Stereotyping works by taking a trait which may apply to a small minority of a group and representing it as indicative of the whole group. For example, a common media stereotype is the dumb blonde. The point to remember is that this stereotype is not necessarily inaccurate. There are a great many people in the world who are blonde and there are a great many people in the world who are as Marilyn Monroe puts it in Some Like It Hot ‘not very bright’. Therefore, the simple law of averages dictates that there will indeed be a great many blonde people in the world who are rather ‘dumb’. However, how media stereotyping works is that it suggests that all blonde women are dumb and hence provides the spectator with an easily recognisable, stock character that can be employed within the media text.

Stereotypes are not necessarily negative (that the French are good cooks is a stereotype and certainly not a negative one), but stereotypes
are concerned with a power dynamic in that they ‘pigeonhole’ certain people – usually minorities – into specific categories. This is particularly important in relation to gender when we consider that many stereotypes are extremely sexist and promote gender prejudice. The stereotype of the ‘dumb blonde’, for example, reinforces the perceived notion of blonde women as silly, childlike and sex objects. Usually gender stereotypes work by suggesting that a physical characteristic, an aspect of gender performance, is suggestive of a much more political trait. The effeminate man is a good example here as effeminacy has, in the history of media representation, often been conflated with other less desirable qualities such as evilness or other socially unacceptable characteristics. Even a contemporary, gay-affirmative sitcom such as Will & Grace furthers the stereotype of effeminacy as ‘bad’ through its representation of the effeminate Jack. Not only is Jack’s effeminacy a source of entertainment in itself (he is doing ‘unacceptable’ masculinity), but he is also unemployed, utterly useless and sponges off friends and family for any money he can get. In this respect, Jack’s gender performance (his effeminacy) is conflated with work-shy laziness and lack of talent. The key point, therefore, to remember about stereotypes is that they not only provide a shorthand, an easy way of recognising a specific type in the text, but they can promote sexism or gender prejudice by conflating specific politics with a specific physical trait. In the case of Will & Grace’s Jack, effeminacy stands in for his work-shyness and lack of talent. In this respect, we would argue that the study of gender in the media is a fascinating topic and one which we hope all students will enjoy.

Contents of the Book

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, ‘Questions of Theory’, will outline the main critical and cultural theories in the study of gender. The second part, ‘Media Case Studies’, will show how these critical/cultural paradigms can be applied to contemporary media, including television drama, magazines, celebrity culture, make-over shows and online/web media.

Chapter 1 introduces students to feminist cultural theory and its critical application to the study of media images. The earliest form of feminist criticism challenged the (stereo) types of women deployed by the media, arguing that women were trivialised, erased and objectified by media representations. Psychoanalytically informed work from the same period looked at the ways that sexual difference was implicated in
structures of viewing, whilst work from a cultural studies perspective sought to engage with some of the pleasures offered by engaging in feminine identifications and female genres. We will also consider the recent discussions of media as embedded in a post-feminist climate, with its emphasis of playfulness and irony. We will assess how these insights can be applied in the critical study of contemporary media representations.

Chapter 2 introduces students to the other side of the gender binary: masculinities. Here we will stress the political difference in studying masculinity from femininity as, unlike femininity, masculinity has not required a political formation in order to advance its rights. Indeed, until recently men have had the luxury of not even having to consider themselves as gendered in a similar fashion to how Caucasians have not had to consider themselves raced. We consider the key strategies in the representation of masculinity and how the masculine body can bear the burden of objectification in still and moving images. We will consider recent trends in masculinity which have been represented in media texts such as ‘New Laddism’. In doing so, we consider masculinity’s anxiety about femininity and, more importantly, effeminacy – often termed ‘effeminophobia’. Finally, we explore the speculative claims for ‘metrosexuality’ and ask if recent media images, especially advertising, are addressing this cultural trend.

These two chapters concern masculinity and femininity as a fixed binary system. In Chapter 3 we introduce students to the key debates within contemporary queer theory, outlining the work of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and how they challenge the idea of a simplistic two gender system. In her famous book, *Gender Trouble*, Butler argued that gender is a performative effect, a collection of acts or ‘doings’ which, within a recognised social system, creates the illusion of a fixed gender identity. Many ‘queer’ images – including many contemporary media images – denaturalise this seemingly fixed gender identity and demonstrate that gender is a ‘doing’. There is nothing behind the actions or doings themselves; it is these actions or doings which create the impression of a gender identity. If gender is performative then it is a flexible construct and limiting gender into the binary system of masculinity and femininity seems reductionist.

However, queer theory moves a stage beyond feminist criticism by considering that if gender is regarded as the scaffold for sexual attraction (heterosexuality is the sexualisation of the masculine/feminine binary) then exposing its performative nature challenges heterosexuality’s assumed naturalness. Sedgwick develops Butler’s thesis further by
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