the body, debates within cyberfeminism have been concerned, especially in Haraway's work, with feminism's interest in theorizing new connections between humans and machines. Thus, the chapter ends by a consideration of the possibilities of a re-imagined body through technology, but also asks if the new gender identities which may emerge in online spaces are informed by class and race.

Media and Popular Culture

RUTH HOLLIDAY

This chapter outlines some of the landmark feminist and gender studies of popular culture and explores the ways in which contemporary debates have moved on since these early positions were developed. The material presented is necessarily selective, since popular culture is such a vast and diverse subject. I focus primarily on media content, showing how some adverts, movies, TV shows, magazines and popular literature address and represent gender. There is a central tension running through feminist work on popular culture between writers who emphasize the ways in which women are frequently represented in highly negative ways, and those that foreground the pleasure that women gain from consuming media texts. The chapter begins by outlining early debates about gender and representation in advertising – one of feminism's first engagements with popular culture. It then explores gender and consumption more generally, particularly more recent debates examining the pleasure of the consumer. Next the chapter focuses on the production and consumption of texts such as film, television, romantic fiction and magazines. I end by examining the recent growth in 'lifestyle TV' as a media form that links entertainment, advertising and consumption in very direct ways.

Gender and consumption

Marxist writers argue that capitalist organizations own both the means of producing products and the media industries that advertise them – capitalism therefore both produces our desires and fulfils them. To think outside of this artificially created set of needs is impossible according to many writers such as Adorno (1991) or Baudrillard (1993) – except in their own cases, of course. In addition, since capitalism's aim is to generate ever-expanding profits it must sell cheap, mass produced products in a way that fools us into thinking they are designed for us as individuals (Althusser, 1971). This also applies to media products that compete for viewing figures in order to secure advertising revenue and which also carry ideological messages about the world to ensure our compliance with the capitalist system as workers and consumers.

Many feminist writers (for example Williamson, 1978) have a lot of sympathy with this position, but they claim a Marxist analysis is incomplete (for

example Hartmann, 1997). Women, they argue, are doubly disadvantaged since big businesses are not just run by capitalists but by capitalist *men.* Women are therefore at the mercy of both capitalist and patriarchal ideologies. Media and advertising images continuously display idealized versions of women – as good, beautiful, glamorous and feminine women caring for their husbands and children, or bad seducers and manipulators of men and uncaring 'career bitches'. Marxism has not been able to address the specific problems of wom en, and in many ways has added to their negative representation. If women are seen primarily as consumers then it is women who are most duped by, and most supportive of, capitalism. This allows for Marxist models that celebrate the collective heroism of the masculine worker/producer whilst condemn ing the individualistic selfishness of the feminine consumer. But where did this perception originate? And what is the actual relationship of gender and consumption? I will firstly take a closer look at the ideological messages that feminist writers have identified, and then take a brief look at the history of consumer culture and shopping practices in particular, to demonstrate how consumption has come to be seen as a gendered practice.

Advertising – selling (to) women

Marketing is the broad term given to the scoping, design, development, adver tising and sale of commodities, but many writers on gender have turned their attention to advertising as a particularly important cultural force. Erving Goff man (1976) was one of the first people to write about this. Goffman examined the ways in which men and women were differently placed in advertising imag es in the 1970s. He argued that certain poses represent power and others sub ordination, some represent activity and others passivity. For instance, men were frequently positioned standing over seated women or smaller children. Men therefore seemed to be surveying or protecting whilst women and children were protected or surveyed. Women were often pictured cradling or caressing a commodity, whilst men grasped or manipulated objects, demonstrating their active role in relation to the world. In general women were depicted in passive and subordinate poses – a female nurse looking on as a male doctor performed an operation, for example, or a man adjusts a sail whilst a woman stands on a boat in her bikini – being looked at, rather than participating in the activities. Judith Williamson (1978) drew on the work of Roland Barthes (1957) to show how commodities are woven into a network of meanings in advertis ing. Barthes talks about 'mythologies' or ideologies and a system of 'signs' through which certain images come to stand in for certain other things. This system of linking things and meanings, and the process of uncovering those meaning is called semiotics. One of Barthes' best known examples is of red roses. He explains that we cannot give someone a bunch of roses without the associated meaning of love – or passion. We use roses to express love or pas sion. However, there is nothing about the rose itself that is connected to love.

Love could just as easily be connected to an onion or a cauliflower. However, over time using roses to express love has become congealed into a taken-for granted idea. We can no longer think about roses without thinking about love, a connection that has become naturalized. Importantly, in order to express our love we have to purchase roses – a commodity.

Williamson drew on semiotics and applied a feminist analysis to demon strate how advertisers attempt to create naturalized associations between the commodities they are commissioned to sell and positive characteristics that we might aspire to. Products are frequently linked to idealized families where a mother provides healthy meals (breakfast cereals) or clean fresh laundry (wash ing powders) for her family. Advertisements for alcoholic drinks, for instance, frequently position men and women in groups of friends, laughing, joking and flirting with each other. In this way advertisers try to fix their products to the positive connotations of friendship, romance and sexual attraction/attractive ness. In particular women's bodies are central to adverts for both women's and men's products. Groomed, slender, attractive, made-up (mostly white) women's bodies are semiotically linked to products from the bar snacks you can buy in your local pub (removing each packet of peanuts from a card back ground uncovers more of a scantily clad woman's body) to top of the range cars (a woman in a bikini is draped over the bonnet). This advertising links, for example, fast cars with sexual prowess with the message that if you buy this car you can attract this woman because it displays your wealth and women desire wealthy men. These kinds of adverts are so ubiquitous they mostly pass without comment. However, they have been a catalyst for feminist activism and direct actions have focused on defacing posters. A billboard near to my home for a L'Oreal product, for instance, whose tag line was 'Because you're worth it' was altered to say 'Because you're anorexic' instead. However, it was a campaign for Lee Jeans in the 1990s that featured a woman's stiletto heeled foot poised behind a naked male ass with the tag line 'Put the Boot In' that attracted so many complaints from the public it had to be withdrawn. The furore prompted claims from male ad agents that gender equality has 'gone too far'.

Advertising cannot simply reproduce the same old images over and over because contemporariness and fashion are also highly valued. Thus, more re cently the 'cereal packet' (or idealized) families, formerly a staple of ad cam paigns, have evolved to represent more realistic and up-to-date family forms, see below.

> One washing powder advert shows a son washing his mother's cardigan before she goes out on her date. Far from the idealized family, then, this is a single-parent household where the son takes his share of the domestic responsibilities. This might be construed as a positive step for the representation of women in advertising, were it not for the reason the son washes his mother's cardigan – to cover up her cleavage exposed by her revealing dress. In other words the son is trying to control his mother's sexuality by covering her up with a cardigan!

Advertising must constantly evolve in order to address its markets. Global ization has led many companies to target wealthy elites in an ever expanding number of countries – China, Japan, Korea, and India, for instance – who represent eager consumers for high end products. Expanding global markets for fashion, for example, have [significantly increased the number of black, Asian and East Asian fashion models represented, breaking with the tradition of using only light-skinned, blonde models to connote success.] In addition, [older models are now being used to appeal to women in their 40s and 50s] who represent an independently successful and highly lucrative target market. Because of the pressure on the advertising industry to capture the zeitgeist, it [has also had to deal with feminism.] As a significant cultural force that has been highly critical of the representation of women, feminism couldn't be ignored by advertisers, so instead it has been largely incorporated into advertising and used to sell commodities. Goldman (1992) calls this 'commodity feminism' (a play on commodity fetishism discussed by Karl Marx). Goldman argues that advertisers have appropriated feminism to such an extent that one can now be a feminist by consuming certain kinds of products. An advert for Jean-Paul Gaultier perfume clearly illustrates this point:

> The ad depicts a watery landscape. In the foreground the top of the Arc de Triomphe is visible upon which sits a beautiful mermaid singing through a loudhailer. Floating past her, not meeting her gaze but joining in her song, are two sailors kept afloat by red and white striped lifebelts. They are dressed in trademark Gaultier Breton jerseys. In the background the Eiffel Tower lists dramatically to one side and in the foremost corner Gaultier perfume, styled in a bottle shaped like a woman's corseted torso, floats innocently past. Using a semiotic analysis we can 'decode' this advert to explore the use of feminism to sell the perfume. Most perfume adverts use mythology to link their products with (hetero)sexual desirability – women using this perfume will be more attractive to men. The Gaultier ad forecloses this interpretation in a number of ways. Firstly, the woman is not a woman, she is a mermaid (and thus because she cannot be penetrated, she cannot be heterosexual). Second, the men in the picture are clearly coded as gay, using the twin connotations of the Gaultier jersey (Gaultier is gay and something of a gay icon) and of the sailor – another classic gay icon. Even the best perfume would not result in their attraction to her. In addition to this, the traditional symbols of masculinity within the picture are subverted, the phallic Eiffel Tower is leaning (drooping) and the Arc de Triomphe – a celebratory symbol of war – barely breaks the surface of the water. The primary message of the ad, then, is that the old male-dominated world is gone, and in the new flooded one the woman/ mermaid has evolved to flourish. Heterosexual men are drowned, we assume, since they are absent, perished in the shipwreck precipitated by the woman/mermaid/siren who sings together with the gay men – the only male survivors. The perfume bottle, designed like a corseted woman, also draws on naturalized signifiers. The corset – the very symbol of women's oppression, that quite literally controlled her body – was reclaimed by the notorious pop star Madonna. Her corset, designed by Gaultier, more closely resembled armour than underwear, and signified women's sexuality as strength. This new world, the advert tells us, is a woman's world. Thus, feminism (and cosmopolitanism) are firmly linked to the Gaultier perfume. A woman can signify her feminism by purchasing and wearing this exclusive (highly expensive) product – a far cry from feminism's roots in socialism.

However, we have to be careful about the assumptions we make about how adverts are actually understood by consumers. Signs, as Barthes says, are 'polysemic.' This means that [any image or text can have multiple meanings depending on the frame of reference of the viewer/reader.] The Gaultier ad is clearly designed to appeal to women 'in the know' (influenced by feminism) who can recognize the signs (and afford the perfume). Increasingly such codes are being used to create middle-class (feminist) identities based on being in the know about gender, sexuality and 'race', such as the 'cosmopolitan' or the 'metrosexual' (see Hollows and Moseley, 2005). To decode the Gaultier advert effectively the reader must understand and be aware of feminist critiques of phallic architecture, the difference between restraining corsets and the subverted version modelled by Madonna, the connections between Gaultier, sailors and gayness, and many others. In fact the advert congratulates those who can effectively decipher all of these signs, and in validating the reader's detailed knowledge it signals to them that this is certainly the perfume for them simultaneously producing them as a lifestyle category. However, women as the target of adverts rather than the objects of them have a long history and that is because historically women have been most strongly associated with consumption.

Gender and consumption – a brief history

Shopping as we understand it today is a relatively new experience. Better transport networks developed in the nineteenth century west eased the flow of materials, products and people into and out of cities and facilitated the birth of department stores which carried a huge range of products, on a number of floors. These stores used advertising to bring customers in and displays to provide a spectacle, inviting customers to walk around and to browse, not only to purchase the product they went in for. However [consumption took place within a particular set of gender relations.] Whilst working-class women in the nineteenth century were working long hours in sometimes gruelling conditions, bourgeois women, were pushed into a life of enforced inactivity (McClintock, 1995). Only aristocrats could really refrain from working, but by emulating the aristocracy the bourgeois classes could accrue status by association. To be 'respectable', then, meant to [stay within the home] and this caused a number of problems for retailers. Department stores compensated for the problem of respectability by turning themselves into a largely female-only space – an 'Adamless Eden' as Gail Reekie (1992) puts it in her Melbourne-based study. Although the products they sold were often relatively cheap, they cultivated an aristocratic aura of luxury through extravagant décor and personalized service. By deliberately employing middle-class women as shop assistants they [simultaneously created a respectable feminine occupation – and a new set of customers.] Stores also hosted fashion shows (10,000 women over 4 days attended a fashion show in Melbourne's McWhirters store in 1931) and

even made free meeting rooms available for women's organizations (Reekie, 1992). As a public space where women could go unchaperoned, away from the possibility of bumping into family friends and neighbours, the city centre department store offered middle-class women the exciting possibility of rein-venting themselves. Women could be free of masculine surveillance and could themselves gaze upon city life from the safety of the store. ✱

In terms of extravagance, department stores were surpassed only by shop-ping malls that originated in the US in the 1980s. Such spaces constitute shopping as something far from necessity, as a day out, and a leisure activ-ity in and of itself. However, whilst the Marxists continue to condemn such spaces as 'temples of consumption' designed for the 'worship of commodities', malls afford many benefits for women. Car parking is conveniently close to the shops and for a mother with young children this is an important factor. Multiple lifts accommodate pushchairs and prams but if she does not want to take them around the shops with her a mother can leave her children securely in the crèche. Security guards and bright lighting mean that women shoppers feel safer than they might do outside on the streets, especially during winter evenings. Shopping malls are public buildings that have quite simply been designed (unusually) with women in mind (Miller et al., 1998).

Unlike Marxists, John Fiske (1989) celebrates the shopping mall as a 'femi-nine' space. Reading a bumper sticker that states 'When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping', he demonstrates how this ironic subversion of the more usual phrase 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going' undoes a central tenet of masculinity through its association with the feminine. Fiske ex-plains that whilst toughness and masculinity are linked to production, feminin-ity is linked to consumption. In this sticker, shopping as a tough activity (toil and labour) disrupts its association with leisure and femininity. At the same time the idea that men work and women spend also undermines the hero-ism attached to labour and being a breadwinner – providing for one's family. Providing is at the heart of masculinity, but when women celebrate shopping they trivialize this – he works so she can frivolously spend. Heroic labour and provision are undone via a few credit cards. However, what Fiske misses is that (-) men accompanied by young, beautiful, fashionable women also demonstrate their wealth and power, not just in being able to attract such a woman (signi-fying sexual prowess) but also in being able to maintain her looking young, beautiful and fashionable takes considerable labour and is usually incompatible with full-time employment). Shopping may undo one kind of masculinity, but it also perpetuates others.

What all of the theorists cited above fail to discuss, however, is that most shopping, far from being leisurely and glamorous is actually food shopping, or 'provisioning' as Danny Miller (1998) calls it. In fact, then most shopping is simply another domestic chore primarily undertaken by women. But this does not mean it is an activity without meaning. Miller demonstrates that many women use food shopping to express love and care for their families. Buying low-fat yogurts or sugar-free drinks expresses the women's concern for the health and well-being of their families. Miller says that, despite the fact that all of the women in his study were well aware of the discourse of the self-ish consumer, none of them actually behaved according to this model. Instead he conceptualized shopping as a sacrifice made on the part of the woman for her household. *Discuss*

We should not be seduced into thinking, however, that men do not con-sume. Many recent writers have talked about the increasing importance of men's consumption in areas like health, fashion and skincare. However, similar claims were being made as far back as the 1950s and 1960s when the bachelor was a prominent feature of the popular imagination (Osgerby, 2001). Bach-elors lived in 'pads' decorated with the latest modernist furniture, they enter-tained, they skied, they holidayed abroad and were resoundingly condemned as irresponsible sufferers of 'arrested development'. Unlike the breadwinner, the bachelor's limited responsibilities and excessive consumption failed to make him a 'proper man'. Yet even the breadwinner of the 1950s had his own room within the family home – the music room – where he listened to his often ex-tensive music collection. Men have always consumed small things like music, films and gadgets and large things such as cars, sports equipment and yachts, and unlike women's consumption, men's is much less likely to have a purpose beyond leisure. However, much of men's consumption remains invisible in the (-) Marxist 'discourse of shopping' since shopping is always already constituted as a feminized activity. This poses particular problems for producers and market-ers of products which are also designed to fit a gendered script.

Cynthia Cockburn and Susan Ormrod (1993) present us with an excel-lent example of what happens when marketers fail to address their targeted customers when they discuss the marketing of the microwave in the 1980s. The microwave was initially designed for use on submarines and constituted a high-tech development of space-age proportions. Marketers presumed that because of its technical nature women would be unable to understand its op-eration and would reject the product. Microwaves were therefore developed as 'brown goods', adorned with complicated dials and switches and accompanied by a substantial manual. They were placed amongst the other brown goods – hi-fis, video players and televisions (men's leisure products) and marketed as gifts for wives. This strategy proved totally unsuccessful as men were re-luctant to buy ovens even on behalf of their partners. The microwaves were simplified and repackaged as 'white goods'. Placed among the fridges, wash-ing machines, and dryers (women's labour products), they were sold with a cookbook instead of a manual. This proved the more successful strategy and the microwave is now an essential appliance in most western kitchens.

Men producing culture

Many writers now argue that we live in a media saturated society, and that our consumption of media content structures and perpetuates our ideas about

gender (for example see Van Zoonen, 1994; Gauntlett, 2002). Furthermore, since media organizations are mostly owned and run by powerful white men, this inevitably has an impact on the kinds of products they produce, and in particular, on the ways in which women and men are represented. This was made particularly stark in an early study by Angela McRobbie (1978) of girls' comics. Focusing on *Jackie* magazine, aimed at pre-teen girls, she showed how the company that produced it was run almost exclusively by men. McRobbie looked at the impact this had on the actual content of the magazine and found that there were a number of specific codes that structured the magazine's features. The first code was the code of heterosexual romance which advised girls, in both the stories and the problem pages, that their ideal destiny was marriage. Ideal girls were represented as passive – for example, in stories where a girl's boyfriend goes off with her best friend, the ideal outcome is that the girl waits patiently for the boy to come back to her. The stories were always about love and romance and never about sex. 'Feelings' for other girls expressed on the letters pages were always dealt with as a problem the reader will soon grow out of. Ideal girls were always blonde, other girls were brunette bitches, only represented as competitors for the affections of a boy. Black or Asian girls were almost never seen on the pages of *Jackie*. Much of the magazine was given over to beauty tips, and in particular, what beauty products to consume. In contrast boys' comics focused on action and adventure, or sports and hobbies.

McRobbie claimed that capitalism and patriarchy combine in the girls' magazines to create particularly powerful ideologies, and that these are particularly hard to resist since girls read the comics alone in their bedrooms during their leisure time. This prevents any kind of collective action they might engage in to resist the comic's messages. McRobbie received some criticism for her work, mostly because she never tried to find out what messages girls actually took from the comics. By focusing only on the comic's production and content, she missed the practice of consumption – reading – that the girls engaged in (Frazer, 1987). Subsequent writers suggested that girls may be more able to resist the restricted versions of femininity presented in them than McRobbie gave them credit for. More recently McRobbie (2000) has revisited this theme in her analyses of *Just Seventeen* and *More* magazine. She found some changes to more contemporary magazines – such as a focus on sex and careers rather than love and marriage, and a broader range of girls and young women represented in terms of 'race' or sexuality. This, she claimed, was largely because of changes in the production process as more women were actively involved in putting the magazine together. A major shift was in the tone of the problem page – now an advice column – which previously addressed girls in rather moralistic and authoritarian ways. The new columns adopted the style of 'big-sisterly' advice. However, the focus on consumption, body maintenance and beauty was still a major element, suggesting that sex and careers are simply added on to existing definitions of femininity prevalent in earlier magazines. These characteristics still pervade many women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle*.

Another significant development since McRobbie's study has been the massive growth in men's and 'lifestyle' magazines. Style magazines, a new and self-consciously ungendered format, such as *Face* and *i-D* in the UK, grew from humble beginnings to define the look and content of a new breed of magazines. Combining fashion spreads, music and film reviews, interviews and commentary, and employing some of the best known lifestyle journalists and columnists of the era, the style press knowingly played with magazine stereotypes as well as the pretensions of their readership, imagined as a metrocentric, taste-making elite (Nixon, 1996). These magazines showed that there was a market for new formats, and crucially that men were an important target market – opening enough space for the creation of a new type of men's magazines, which shared the style press's interest in fashion and grooming, but which now began to target an idealized 'new man' reader – a man sufficiently at ease with his own masculinity to be able to look at male fashion models, and to consider shopping, grooming and lifestyle as suitable topics for a man to read about. However, subtle shifts in the form and content of men's magazines across the 1990s in the UK suggested that a limit to the ease of this reader had been reached, and the men's magazines shifted in emphasis and tone. Where early issues of magazines such as *GQ* (Gentlemen's Quarterly) had centrally focused on men, for example always featuring a male celebrity on the cover, across the decade images of women came to dominate, and the overall content of the magazines refocused, crucially around heterosexual sex. The pictures of male fashion models and skin and haircare products had to be counterbalanced with soft-core images of women in order for men to escape the suggestion of homosexuality that would otherwise hang uneasily over the act of looking at another man. This trend reached its acme with the arrival of the so-called lads' mags, epitomized in the UK by *Loaded*, a magazine which, with alleged postmodern irony championed 'politically incorrect' male interests and pursuits (Jackson et al., 2001). The 'laddification' of men's magazines arguably infected the entire genre, and even the ungendered *Face* fell victim, closing down in May 2004. The lads' mags proliferated and diversified, segmenting the market further until it was extended beyond saturation, and a number of titles folded (such as *Loaded*'s food-based stablemate *Eat Soup*). Weekly lads' mags such as *Zoo* and *Nuts* represent a more recent addition, aimed at capturing a more time-sensitive market than the more common monthlies. However, after impressive initial sales figures, magazines like these have struggled in the marketplace, their predicament attributed by industry pundits to either the end of the 'new lad' movement, or the availability of laddish content, especially pornography, more widely across other media such as cable television and the internet.

Negative representations?

So both women's and men's magazines have traditionally represented women in fairly restrictive ways. Feminist investigations of film have painted

a depressingly similar picture (Creed, 1993; Stacey, 1993; Tasker, 1998). In cinema then, women in the past have frequently been restricted to a limited range of roles and were most highly valued for their looks sometimes accessed via the notorious 'casting couch'). In addition, representations of women seemed to be divided into two kinds – good women and bad women, known as the 'Madonna/whore' dichotomy. Good women in the west (just like in the *Jackie* comics) were most often blonde and backlighting was used to effect a kind of 'halo' at key moments in the film. These good women were passive, seeking love and marriage, and care for the male hero. On the other hand, bad women usually had dark hair and were sexually predatory and seductive. The most extreme of these caricatures is the femme fatale, most frequently found in 'film noir' of the 1940s and 1950s (see Kaplan, 1980, for a classic study). The femme fatale was profoundly dangerous and usually served to distract the hero from his real business. She was a destructive force, someone who seduced the hero, not because she loved him, but to confuse and distract him for some ulterior motive. At the end of the film the femme fatale was almost always punished by plot devices such as being killed, going blind or losing everything she had worked so hard to gain. This narrative is still evident in many countries' film productions, especially perhaps postcolonial and nationalist ones. Postcolonial national cultures often look to pre-colonial times to reclaim their 'authentic' values. Because women more than men often symbolize nationhood they carry the burden of representing moral values from history. Issues of women's morality are central to the Nigerian 'home video' genre (produced cheaply and circulated via copied video tape or dvd), for example. The women at the centre of these films are frequently implicitly represented in opposition to 'immoral' western women: African women's sexuality is represented by contrast as loyal, subservient and desexualized, and any deviation from this model is severely punished.

Film noirs included movies such a *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). However, the genre made a resurgence from the 1980s – now known as 'new noir' or 'neo-noir' – with films such as *The Grifters* (1990), *Red Rock West* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Mary Ann Doane (1992) theorized that film noirs appear at times when women make political and economic gains – when women took over men's jobs during the Second World War, for instance – and that they reflect a kind of paranoia on the part of the misogynist film industry about women taking power. However, new noirs such as the Cohen Brothers' *Fargo* (1996) which stars Frances McDormand as a pregnant and extremely tenacious police chief investigating a kidnap and murder, or the Wachowski brothers' *Bound* (1996) in which Corky, a tough female ex con, and her gangster's moll lover Violet, concoct a scheme to steal millions of dollars of mob money, for instance, offer more progressive roles for women. In addition films made by female directors, such as Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel* (1990) have been credited with transforming the noir genre and offering more positive and interesting roles (and role models) for women. However, there has also been some debate by feminists about what constitutes a 'positive' film noir since the powerful figure of the femme fatale is both the phallic woman of men's paranoid fantasies and a key source of viewing pleasure for female audiences. An argument over the John Dahl film *The Last Seduction* (1994) exemplifies this:

> *The Last Seduction* features a woman, Bridget, who pushes her doctor husband, Clay to get involved in a $700,000 drug deal. Clay thinks the money is to secure his and Bridget's future, but she has other plans -- why split the money when she can keep it all for herself? She grabs the money and runs off to a small town, Beston, where she can hide out until she can divorce Clay or have him killed. Whilst in Beston, Bridgit meets the homely country boy Mike Swale who thinks the town is too small for him and longs for adventure. To her, he's a means to an end, another pawn in her manipulative games. To him, she's the love of his life, offering the excitement and adventure of big city life. Bridgit discovers that Mike's last foray into the big city resulted in him getting unwittingly married to a transsexual woman. She uses the possibility of disclosing this information in conservative small-town Beston to involve Mike in an insurance scam, killing adulterous husbands and splitting the life insurance money with their widows. She uses the small town's sexism and racism to her advantage, claiming protection from its inhabitants to hide from an 'abusive' husband and to avoid prosecution for the murder of a black detective her husband sent to find her. In the final scene, Bridgit manipulates Mike into killing Clay and then frames Mike for her rape, walking away free with the $700,000. Unlike earlier film noirs, Bridgit is not punished in the plot.

Films like *The Last Seduction* split feminist opinion. Some writers claim that Bridgit is the worst kind of male paranoid fantasy, the ultimate negative representation of womanhood. However, there is no denying that many women find femme fatale characters such as Bridgit extremely pleasurable to watch. Identifying with the 'good' woman positions the female viewer as virtuous, but ultimately passive and rather boring. Identifying with the femme fatale, on the other hand, positions her as active, controlling and exciting. Many women enjoy watching a woman hold all the cards, giving the hopeless and inept male hero the run around. The femme fatale is always an emasculating force and enables the fantasy of power and control over men that women frequently lack in their 'real' lives. However, the femme fatale gains her power through a highly sexualized form of ruthlessness, reinforcing the myth that women control men via their sexuality. In reality, however, men more usually control women's sexuality. Men's perception of women's infidelity, whether real or not, is a major cause of domestic violence or even the murder of women by their partners or ex-partners all over the world, and is even used in court as mitigation, seeming to justify the man's actions, in many countries.

We also need to question the heterosexual male viewer's pleasure in watching film noir. Despite the 'weak' hero, there are still many benefits for male viewers according to many feminists. One central feminist writer on men's viewing pleasure is Laura Mulvey (1975). Mulvey argues in her famous article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' that men and women in films have profoundly different roles. Men *act* and women *appear*. Men move the plot

forward] they solve mysteries, beat enemies, rescue women in trouble and so on, and[women are their reward for all this activity.]Women, on the other hand, [simply look good and embody 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. They 'sell' the movie by adding beauty and glamour.]Furthermore, since films are produced, directed, filmed and edited (mostly) by men, this also structures how an audience can see the activities and characters in a film. Routine camera techniques have a point of view so that when an audience watches a film they also take that view – as if behind the camera.[The audience therefore watches the film through men's eyes] or through the 'male gaze' as Mulvey calls it. Drawing on Freud, she says that men obtain 'scopophilic' pleasure from looking. Scopophilia in Freud is the[pleasure that (male) infants obtain from gazing upon their mothers' bodies and fantasizing about controlling them.] This is particularly evident in 'romantic' scenes when we are encouraged to experience the man's pleasure. For instance, many sex scenes are filmed from 'on top', looking down on the woman. In the classic 'missionary position' this replicated the man's view of the woman, thus[the woman's sexual point of view is ignored.] More generally, women are frequently shown in a fragmented way, when the camera pans up and down her body, lingering on her buttocks and breasts (or in 'erotic' or pornographic film on her penetrated vagina, mouth or anus). In this sense [women's bodies are constructed as objects for male consumption.] We might think then, that women who go to the cinema are educated in lesbianism. However, Mulvey forecloses this possibility by saying that[woman watch cinema in a 'transsexual' way. Women cannot watch as women, only as men, since the very act of looking is intrinsically masculine,] she argues. This, of course, poses a number of problems for lesbian filmmakers, or visual artists who stand [accused of appropriating masculinity if they present erotically charged images of women]– no matter how those images are styled and constructed. However, a key dilemma for feminists, as Margaret Marshment (1993, 1997) observes is [whether to try, using the conventions of Hollywood, to reach a mass audience with a watered-down feminist politics, or whether to stick to a clear feminist agenda and address a smaller audience, probably already informed of the key issues concerned.] However, 'positive' or realistic representations of women are not always positively received.

The debate about 'positive images' has also focused on 'race' and sexuality (see Young, 1995). Mark Simpson (1996), for example, examined the fate of a popular lesbian and gay TV magazine show called *Out*, which was broadcast by the UK's Channel 4 in the 1980s. One of *Out*'s primary aims was to[combat homophobia and sexism in the media by representing extraordinary lesbians and gay men; in other words, creating positive representations.] The show was broadcast just before a re-run of the popular US TV serial *The Golden Girls*. *The Golden Girls* were four single middle-aged women who shared a house together. Each woman had a very different personality and in many ways this series can be seen as a forerunner to *Sex in the City*. The fact that the women all lived together, in a shared house, pursuing individual lives but also supporting each other, appealed to lesbians and gay men who frequently lived in similar

arrangements.[The UK's Conservative government of the 1980s pejoratively labelled non-heterosexual families as 'pretended families'.] In many ways *The Golden Girls* could be read by a queer audience as constituting a 'pretended family'. This was especially important in the 1980s as there were no shows like *Will and Grace, Queer as Folk, The L Word* or *Six Feet Under* that routinely represent the lives of gay men, and sometimes lesbians. Instead queer audiences had to undertake 'queer readings' of straight TV programmes.

[Because all representations are polysemic (subject to multiple interpretations) there is always space available for texts to be read against their intended meanings.] Thus, we can use highly conventional products and['subvert' their meanings by manipulating signs.] In the case of *The Golden Girls* the programme's makers became aware of its queer following and camped the show up a little bit more – but never introduced overtly lesbian characters. Eventually, *The Golden Girls* was pulled, and viewing figures for *Out* dropped from 4 million to under 1 million. Mark Simpson speculates that this is because [reading against the intended meanings of texts is more fun and offers more creative possibilities for viewers than watching positive representations.]In fact, he argues,[positive representations may actually make us feel bad – guilty – for not living up to the high and principled standards of the heroic people depicted]in programmes such as *Out*. This might explain why books and films like *Bridget Jones*, for instance are so popular amongst women, because they [represent our faults and insecurities and make us laugh when we recognize them (although they offer men as the only solution to these problems).]

Feminine forms

So, if idealized representations of women or lesbians don't really bring us pleasure, what does? Several feminists have looked at[the problem of 'mass culture' aimed at women]– in other words, from a Marxist perspective[culture produced according to clear formulae that are repeated over and over again and marketed to a mass audience.]If this mass culture is so bad, then[why do women like it so much?]This has been a key question (and frustration) for feminists since the 1970s. Perhaps the answers to this question could not be found in the books, films or TV shows themselves; feminists had to ask women themselves what they liked about them. One landmark investigation was carried out by Janice Radway in 1987 (see box overleaf).

Since the early romantic novels,[a more 'raunchy' genre of romantic fiction began to develop.] Known as 'bodice-rippers' these novels incorporated [highly explicit sex scenes, to the extent that they have been called 'pornography for women']by Lewallen (1988). Despite the failure of pornographic magazines aimed at heterosexual women in the 1990 (largely due to the illegality of showing an erect penis, perhaps), this genre has grown and developed such that Mills and Boon in the UK have launched a new brand of[erotic fiction aimed at women and informed by feminism]known as Red Dress books.

Radway studied the reading habits of a group of women in a small American town known as Smithton. They all read a brand of romantic fiction, known as <u>Harlequin</u> <u>Romances</u> (equivalent to Mills and Boon in the UK). Janice Radway was highly sceptical about the benefits of romantic fiction when she began her study. She felt that reading romance detracted from the women's potential to become feminists – both ideologically in terms of presenting men and marriage as the solution to their problems, and in terms of taking up their free time. Radway concludes that romances provide a set of key <u>functions</u>. Firstly, they provided a sense of escape from the boring drudgery of domestic chores. Secondly, they compensated for the lack of emotional care that men give women and allowed women to interpret their husbands' indifference towards them as 'inadequate expression', rather than inadequate feeling. Finally, the act of reading the novels allowed women a break from domestic chores and time for themselves away from the demands of their families.

Another similar publisher, Black Lace, is discussed by Hardy (2001) as part of a growing market for 'chick lit' – popular fiction (exemplified by *Bridget Jones' Diary* aimed at cosmopolitan 20–30 somethings that addresses the themes of work, sex and relationships.

The pleasure of the text

Debates about viewing pleasure have also focused on another key cultural form – <u>soap opera</u>. Soap operas tend to address domestic lives and relationships between people (Geraghty, 1990) and therefore have a particular resonance with women's concerns that other media forms don't (excepting perhaps the melodrama, see Gledhill, 1988). However, soaps receive enormous criticism from male TV viewers which sometimes makes it difficult for women to explain why they like them. Ien Ang (1985) analyzed viewers of the American soap opera *Dallas*. She split her respondents into Dallas 'haters', 'lovers' and ironic viewers. The 'haters' deployed what Ang called the 'ideology of mass culture'. This began as an academic criticism of popular TV but has now become part of common knowledge. 'Lovers' on the other hand found it very difficult to explain why they liked the show and tended to make excuses. Ironic viewers said they enjoyed the show because, or despite the fact that, it was 'bad'. But some of these ironic viewers displayed a detailed knowledge of the show and performed what Ang called '<u>surface irony</u>' (they were really lovers). She concluded that 'feminine' popular forms, such as soaps, are so denigrated by the (masculinist) 'ideology of mass culture' that it is impossible for women to justify their viewing habits without claiming ironic distance. However, the pleasure that soaps offer women comes from their 'emotional realism' that other kinds of media forms fail to address.

This focus on domestic and emotional life may also explain why soaps have become a particularly '<u>translatable</u>' form of popular culture, and have often been successful at reversing <u>global flows</u> of culture from west to east and north to south. For example, the popular Colombian telenovela (soap opera) *Betty la fea* was initially broadcast on the Columbian network RCN and then Telemundo – the US's second largest Spanish language TV network – to a massive Latin American audience. The show was so popular, perhaps because it centred on the life of an (ordinary) 'ugly' woman working in the glamorous fashion industry, that it was subsequently adapted and/or shown in a huge number of countries around the world, for instance as *Jassi Jaissi Koi Nahin* (*There's No One Like Jassi*) in India, *Esti Ha'mechoeret (Ugly Esti)* in Israel, *Ne Rodis' Krasivoy (Don't Be Born Beautiful)* in Russia, and *Yo soy Bea (I am Bea)* in Spain, to name just a few. In the US the show was remade as *Ugly Betty* and achieved huge viewing figures both in the US and UK. The show is billed as a 'dramedy' or comedy-drama, a style of television in which there is an equal balance of humour and serious content. Thus soap opera has in some cases moved to *incorporate* the very irony which women initially used to *justify* their viewing pleasure.

In recent years, British soaps have also tried to tackle serious issues like rape or domestic violence in realistic and responsible ways, making visible issues that are frequently silenced in women's real lives. For example, 'Little Mo', a character who became the victim of domestic violence in *EastEnders*, first worked with scriptwriters and feminists from Women's Refuges to ensure the <u>accuracy</u> of the representation and subsequently became the 'face' of a campaign designed to assist women leaving violent relationships. So soap operas sometimes present feminist issues in responsible ways and work with feminist groups to do so.

A similar link between 'real-life' and TV has been made by critics in relation to the hit teen TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. *Buffy* has been largely well received by feminists and there is an entire journal devoted to 'Buffy Studies' (see *Slayage: The Online Journal of Buffy Studies*). Buffy is a regular small-town American teenager who discovers she has a special calling – to defeat and destroy vampires and demons intent on taking over the earth for the forces of evil. College student (of popular culture) by day, slayer by night, Buffy is assisted by a circle of friends, in particular, one of the few positive lesbian characters on TV, Willow, a nerdish but powerful witch. *Buffy* mixes genres. The series focuses on both personal relationships – the problems of falling for a vampire, or a demon, for instance – with lots and lots of action, featuring at its centre a slim, blonde, teenage girl who 'kicks ass'. *Buffy* builds on a new genre of '<u>action heroine</u>' movies such as *Alien, The Terminator, The Long Kiss Goodnight* as well as martial arts (Wŭxiá) films featuring 'warrior women' such as the Chinese *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero*. These in turn have inspired US films like *Kill Bill* and arguably connect to '<u>girl power</u>', a concept popularized by the British band The Spice Girls (Tasker, 2004). It would seem that Buffy has done much to <u>inspire a generation of young women</u>. For instance a TV documentary broadcast in 2003 interviewed young women who had been attacked by men. The women explained how they had fought off their assailants after thinking 'what would Buffy do in a situation like this'

However, before we prematurely celebrate the dawn of a new era of gender-neutral TV, we also need to address a new genre of 'lifestyle' TV. In many ways lifestyle TV takes us back to the beginning of this chapter. Shows like *The Swan, Extreme Makeover* and *America's Next Top Model* in the US and *Ten Years Younger* and *What Not to Wear* in the UK are essentially programmes aimed at women which instruct us how to improve our bodies through consumption. Each of these shows takes 'ordinary' members of the public and remodels them through aesthetic surgery, cosmetic dentistry, hair restyling, fashion and make-up instruction and dieting and exercise regimes. Women are instructed that in order to 'feel good' they need to look good, and consuming commodities is the way to achieve this. The global market for aesthetic surgery is booming. Women have obviously made significant gains since the 1970s in terms of careers, education and legal rights, but perhaps this new-found independence comes on the condition that women look good. Women may have more of their own money than ever before, but they are increasingly spending it on maintaining their appearances (Black, 2004), and the media is clearly promoting this.

And there is some evidence that representations of women are perpetuating, maybe even intensifying, women's concern with their bodies. A rise in labia trimming, and anal bleaching, for instance, has been attributed to the growing influence of pornography, where female actors' bodies are cropped, clipped and airbrushed in the production process such that they cease to resemble 'real' women's bodies at all (Blum, 2003). In addition, there has been an apparent rise in young women aspiring to become strippers and glamour models. Many feminists have criticized young women (sometimes called ladettes) who go out on the town, drinking excessively and dressing scantily whilst claiming the status of 'liberated women'. Ariel Levy, in her book on 'women and the rise of raunch culture' (2005), argues that this 'new liberation' looks just like the 'old objectification' and that women are simply being duped by popular culture into becoming 'female chauvinist pigs', making themselves into male fantasies on behalf of men. However, there are serious questions to be debated here. Many young women clearly feel empowered in this guise. Beverley Skeggs (1997) talks at length about respectability and how young women needed to be respectable (desexualized, but ironically also heterosexual) in order to accrue status in society. In addition the bodies of 'other' (working-class, colonized or enslaved) women have traditionally been represented as overtly sexual, (busty barmaids, for instance, or black women with large bottoms) and therefore unrespectable. This is why, arguably, when generations of middle-class white women have anxiously wondered 'does my bum look big in this?' they have worried less about their figure than about maintaining their status as different from 'other' women. When white middle-class feminists criticize 'ordinary' women for watching make-over shows or for having cosmetic surgery and for demonstrating overt sexuality, they also need to be wary of how their class and ethnic privilege (not just their feminism) informs this position.

(Holliday and Sanchez Taylor, 2006). Of course, it is one thing if young women feel pressurized to conform to a set of masculinist and unobtainable norms but quite another if they experience getting ready and going out in a group as pleasurable and collective 'dressing up' to mark the end of a boring working week.] DISCUSS

Conclusion

To conclude, then, this chapter has explored the problems of negative representations of women in the media and popular culture but it has also been careful to point out that 'mass culture' also offers women many pleasures. In addition positive representations have been identified as presenting problems for viewers by sometimes setting unachievable standards or reducing audience engagement by reducing their role as 'active readers'. The chapter has also highlighted the impact of feminism on media and popular culture and the uneven and sometimes contradictory ways in which it gets taken up. It should be obvious from the examples presented here that feminism's relationship with popular culture is a difficult one, and that there is much disagreement within feminism about how to deal with it. But perhaps there is one fundamental reason for this. We can find as many positions within feminism as there are types of representation in the media. For every make-over show there is always another looking at the negative experiences of women undergoing cosmetic surgery. What does it mean when attractive young women are also saving the world by fighting demons, or when Germaine Greer becomes a contestant on *Celebrity Big Brother*, for instance? You decide!

Further reading

J. Hollows (2000) *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, Manchester, Manchester University Press
This introductory guide to feminism and popular culture identifies key feminist approaches to popular culture from the 1960s to the present and demonstrates how the relationship between feminism, femininity and popular culture has often been a troubled one. The book introduces the central ideas of both second wave feminism and feminist cultural studies and demonstrates how they inform feminist debates about a range of popular forms and practices through a series of case studies including the woman's film, romantic fiction, soap opera, consumption and material culture.

P. Jackson, N. Stevenson and K. Brooks (2001) *Making Sense of Men's Magazines*, Cambridge, Polity
The last decade witnessed the phenomenal growth of the men's magazine market, raising important questions about the significance of the rise of men's lifestyle magazines for gender politics. The book questions whether or not we are witnessing a backlash against feminism or instead are men's magazines simply harmless fun? It examines how the 'new man' gave way to the 'new lad' and the political issues this raises within the context of the information society.