6 Feminisms and gender

Introduction

This chapter will discuss a range of work in feminist media theory, which can be distinguished from other theories of media given 'Its unconditional focus on analysing *gender* as a mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them' (van Zoonen 1991: 33). I have used the plural term, **feminisms**, in the chapter heading because the different theoretical perspectives we will encounter would be misleadingly huddled together under an umbrella term like 'feminism'. A typical inventory of perspectives - several of which we shall discuss in relation to media theory - would include 'liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical or revolutionary feminism, lesbian feminism, black feminism, postmodern feminism, first-, second- or third-wave feminisms to name just a few' (Boyle 2005: 29). Even the history of feminism is now so long and complex that it is generally divided into three 'waves'. First-wave feminism refers to the early feminists, including the Suffrage Movement that fought to secure the vote for women. Then in the 1960s came second-wave feminism, including the Women's Liberation Movement that campaigned for equal rights on issues such as employment, marital relationships and sexual orientation. Second-wave feminism, though, is often regarded as less about raw power and more about the power of representation: 'women recognised the need to challenge the dominant ideological definitions of femininity' (Whelehan 1995: 5). What it means 'to be a woman' becomes the central issue.

Perhaps the pioneering voice of the **second wave** was Betty Friedan. In *The Feminine Mystique* (first published in 1963) she writes about a 15-year period after the Second World War in the United States (circa 1945-60) when the 'suburban housewife' became the feminine ideal upon which American women were expected to build their lives. This 'happy housewife heroine' was a myth perpetuated by media and socially accepted to be the 'image of a good woman' (Friedan 1992: 30). From a young age, women were expected to sacrifice their career, independence, skills and qualifications for the benefit of their 'nuclear family'. Friedan's account helped to stir a feminist revolt against this feminine mystique that raged throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and is still engaged in today. But second-wave feminism has been challenged since the 1990s by **postfeminism** and the **third wave**. Postfeminism and third-wave feminism are not synonymous perspectives - as discussed later in the chapter - but they both reject the rigid gender politics of the second wave,

and instead see gender identities as less fixed and personally empowering. These new perspectives followed in the wake of Judith Butler's (1990; 1999) seminal work on gender performativity. As we shall discuss, Butler explores the concept of 'gender' not - in the way it appears - as a natural or biological phenomenon, but as a performance that is socially and culturally constituted. This reminds us of a basic distinction between sex and gender: **sex** is an outcome of nature (we are born male or female); **gender**, on the other hand, is an outcome of culture and society (we grow up in accordance with masculine or feminine norms). In this sense, mass media play an important role in representing gender and the feminist pursuit of gender equality - a role that they have often played badly.

Radical feminism

Second-wave feminism, as we will see in this chapter, accommodates a diverse range of feminist perspectives, each with their own peculiar slant on the problems of **patriarchy**, but all sharing the same anti-patriarchal values and the same goal of equality between the sexes. The most militant form of second-wave feminism is often referred to as 'radical feminism' - a body of theory particularly associated in a media theory context with anti-pornography campaigns and concerns about the 'effects' of sex-role stereotyping. Andrea Dworkin's well-known attack on pornography along with polemic statements such as 'Men are rapists, batterers, plunderers, killers' (Dworkin 1981: 48) position her within radical feminism. Along with feminist lawyer Catherine MacKinnon, Dworkin actively campaigned against the pornography industry by claiming that it violated the civil rights of women. Dworkin argued that pornographic representations of women socialized men into acts of rape and sexual violence in their real lives. Pornography perpetuates the masculine-inflected ideology that women are prostitutes subject to men's sexual domination. Pornography and prostitution are synonymous for Dworkin, who claims that 'The pleasure of the male requires the annihilation of women's sexual integrity' (Dworkin 1981: 47). A graphic illustration of male pleasure in pornography is the close-up focus on a woman's bodily parts, which affords a malign sexual power to the voyeur, and disregards the whole character (i.e. body) of the woman herself. These degrading images of women are underpinned by the ideological implication that 'physical possession of the female is the natural right of the male' (Dworkin 1981: 203). Dworkin's and MacKinnon's ideas continue to fuel debate in contemporary feminist scholarship a decade or two after their conception (see Cornell 2000).

Dworkin and MacKinnon tried - but ultimately failed - to amend the United States Constitution on freedom of speech in order to introduce censorship on pornographic materials. Their anti-pornography campaign has

also been rejected by other second-wave feminists, as well as third-wave feminists and postfeminists (discussed later in this chapter). Liesbet van Zoonen, for instance, questions 'why pornography should be treated as a separate phenomenon, given a wider cultural tradition of representing women as objects of the male gaze' (van Zoonen 1994: 21). A clear theoretical weakness of Dworkin's argument is that it adopts a hypodermic needle model of media effects in assuming that pornography will, in some way, cause male sexual violence against women. Also prone to a behaviourist fallacy is the radical perspective of Gaye Tuchman, who argues that women are 'symbolically annihilated' by television's portrayal of unhealthy sex-role stereotyping and female under-representation. Tuchman argues that mass media such as television act as 'agents of socialization' (Tuchman 1978: 37) in encouraging female viewers to think about marriage ahead of their careers. Echoes of a naïve behaviourism can be heard in her claim that 'Mass-media stereotypes of women as housewives may impede the employment of women by limiting their horizons' (Tuchman 1978: 7). It is one thing to argue that mass media foster traditional sex-role stereotypes, but it is a much less convincing argument which claims that these stereotypes may affect the long-term attitudes and life-courses of women who witness them.

Unfortunately, radical feminism - the least supported perspective among feminists - is the inspiration behind the 'feminist stereotype' that mass media most often foster (van Zoonen 1994). Feminists are often represented by journalists and other 'right-thinking' spokespeople as deviants (see discussion of labelling theory and moral panics in Chapter 5). Feminists are 'lesbians', 'dykes', 'man-eaters', 'man-haters', 'loners', 'extremists', 'physically revolting' - the list goes on. It goes without saying that these media representations of feminism are false and stirred up by the traditional moralist view that feminists are a threat to social order, family life and human reproduction. Moreover, few women celebrities are outspoken feminists. Germaine Greer is an exception to this rule, but her appearance on the British reality TV show *Celebrity Big Brother* (2001-) contributed little to the contemporary feminist cause. Declaring feminist values is considered a dangerous career move, perhaps even more so today than in the 1970s when feminism was at least represented as both a threat to patriarchal order *and* a fashionable, worthwhile pursuit.

McRobbie: the ideology of teenage femininity

The patriarchal ideologies pervading film and media charted by Mulvey, Modleski and Radway are further examined in Angela McRobbie's analysis of teenage girls' magazines and pop music. McRobbie combines theories of structuralism and feminism - sometimes referred to as 'structural feminism'. Perhaps her best-known work (first published in 1977) is a semiotic analysis of *Jackie,* a magazine popular among adolescent British girls in the 1960s and 1970s (see Figure 6.1). According to McRobbie, *Jackie* constructs a conservative ideology of **femininity** for girls aged 10-14 'predicated upon their future roles as wives and mothers' (McRobbie 2000: 78). McRobbie's theoretical perspective is closely associated with Stuart Hall's (1980) Encoding/Decoding model (see Chapter 4) and associative work at the CCCS where she undertook the *Jackie* study. Another feminist associated with the CCCS, Dorothy Hobson, similarly identifies an ideology of femininity on daytime radio shows that cater for housewives and 'reinforce the sexual division of spheres of interest' (Hobson 1980: 114). Hobson argues that housewives are literally 'put in their place' by light-entertainment radio programming - starkly different to the 'hard' pro-gramming (financial news and documentaries) that constructs the ideology of masculinity. Likewise, McRobbie claims that *Jackie* restricts the capacity of its female readers to act against a patriarchal social order and instead promotes -both implicitly and explicitly - values of gentility and domesticity. It does this by presenting consistent images of home-loving women and implying that these representations constitute the 'natural' progression from girlhood to motherhood. The world outside the home, by contrast, is represented in modernity-like fashion as a 'cloyingly claustrophobic environment where the dominant emotions are fear, insecurity, competitiveness and even panic' (McRobbie 2000: 70). *Jackie* constructs its conformist ideology of femininity through four ideological codes that reflect its dominant themes.

First, the code of romance pervades most aspects of the magazine but

Figure 6.1 *Jackie* front cover

particularly the short stories about (heterosexual) relationships - girl meets boy, boy does wrong, girl sobs, boy makes good - in which 'No attempt is made to fill out social events or backgrounds' (McRobbie 2000: 80). The underlying message being encoded to *Jackie* readers is that they should forge romantic attachments sooner rather than later (but no sex before marriage) because the right man is better than the right job. The same code of romance is repetitively re-articulated along these lines:

1 The girl has to fight to *get* and *keep* her man.
2 She can *never* trust another woman unless she is old and 'hideous' in which case she does not appear in these stories anyway.
3 Despite this, romance, and being a girl, are fun.

(McRobbie 2000: 85)

The romance code encourages teenage girls to be competitive and individualistic. A similar argument is made by Janice Winship in her discussion of

the 'aspirational feminism' advocated by women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan:* 'Whatever its gain for individual women, an aspirational feminism works within, not against the competitive organization of work. It is about "I'' rather than "we" ' (Winship 1987: 120). Winship refers to the ideology of individual success and competitiveness encoded into women's magazines. For McRobbie and Winship, 'success' means the achievement of romantic attachments rather than career or educational achievements.

Competitive individualism is also a dominant theme in the second code of personal/domestic life that McRobbie identifies. This code is particularly evident in the letters and problem pages in which anonymous editors respond to readers' concerns. Editors deploy the code of personal/domestic life to *individualize* a reader's problems rather than reassure her that these problems are common for teenagers as a whole. Remedies to these problems are always to encourage readers to conform to the norm. As the author notes, 'Girls are reassured about irregular periods, pubic hair, weight and so on, but there is no mention of contraception or abortion' (McRobbie 2000: 94).

Third, we have the code of fashion and beauty - which are deemed to go hand in hand. Emphasis is placed on good looks above personality; appearance above intelligence. The fashion and beauty pages of *Jackie* reinforce this ideology by presenting models that are physically attractive in a conventional sense. These models radiate what McRobbie calls a 'glow' which connotes that 'if you look good, you feel good' and 'looking as good as this you can expect to be treated as something special, even precious . . . beauty like this is the girls' passport to happiness and success' (McRobbie 2000: 103-4). Beauty and fashion are constantly changing, however, so *Jackie* keeps its readers 'in the know' about what to wear - and what not to wear. The underlying implication of the fashion/beauty code is that girls should keep up-to-date and not get left behind for fear of losing their boyfriends - or being unable to find any.

Fourth and finally is the code of pop music. Contrary to what we might expect though, this code has little to do with music itself and far more to do with the sweet-looking male pop idols that become 'pin-ups' in girls' bedrooms. Music has the potential to be a subversive force for teenagers - some of whom might identify with subcultures (see Chapter 4) - but McRobbie argues that pop music is marketed to teenage girls via media outlets such as *Jackie* in order to encourage conformity to the 'ideal man' myth. Pin-up posters of the latest pop idol constitute 'an *unequal* relationship between the adoring fan and the star looking down at her' (McRobbie 2000: 110). The pop music industry uses its idols to exploit the romantic individualism that is ideologically encoded into teenage girls' lives through the other three codes that *Jackie* reinforces.

In an article entitled 'Rock and Sexuality' (first published in 1978), McRobbie - with co-author Simon Frith - extends her theory of codes to the construction of conventional gender and sexuality in rock and pop music. A

binary construction of pop and rock fandom encourages teenage girls - 'teenyboppers' - to romanticize about boy bands like Take That, while teen-age boys are expected to identify with the macho masculinity of 'cock rockers' such as Thin Lizzy and heavy metal front-men. It is this gender split in fan affiliations - perpetuated by music industry marketing ploys - that lead McRobbie and Frith to the following conclusion:

> Cock rock allows for direct physical and psychological expressions of sexuality; pop in contrast is about romance, about female crushes and emotional affairs. Pop songs aimed at the female audience deny or repress sexuality . . . few alternative readings are available. (McRobbie 2000: 148)

Like *Jackie,* teenybop pop presents a conformist ideology of non-sexualized -but always heterosexual - femininity. The sexist divide between pop and cock rock is further evidenced in the music industry itself. How many female rock musicians are there? Answer: far fewer than there are male ones. As the authors state, 'Female musicians have rarely been able to make their own musical versions of the oppositional rebellious hard edges that male rock can embody' (McRobbie 2000: 143). Female performers in the music industry are mostly sweet-sounding solo artists or members of overtly pop-oriented groups.

While McRobbie's codes of romance, beauty, fashion and pop music can still be interpreted as central to the dominant ideologies disseminated by female-oriented media, there is now a greater diversity of choice than was available 20 or 30 years ago. McRobbie's analysis of more contemporary magazine titles such as *More!* and *Marie Claire* continues to insist on the self-regulatory agenda of these magazines 'in defining and producing the norms of cultural intelligibility through which a girl or woman is permitted to understand herself' (McRobbie 1996: 186). And there is 'still the pressure to adhere to the perfect body image as a prerequisite for the success in love which is equated with happiness' (McRobbie 1994: 165). However, McRobbie acknowledges the declining significance of the romance code and more open discussion of new sexualities in these titles - perhaps a new code of sexuality -including advice on masturbation and lesbianism. Female readers of these magazines encounter 'sexual representations which breach the boundaries of what in the past has been considered appropriate for girls and young women' (McRobbie 1996: 185) partly because some of the women journalists employed by these titles are self-proclaimed feminists. As well as new sex-ualities, McRobbie's ideology of femininity perspective has been questioned by interview research that shows how teenage girls read *Jackie* and similar teen titles lazily, giving little thought to their underlying values and motives (see Frazer 1987).

Butler: Gender Trouble

Like Ang, Butler's work on feminism and the subversion of gender identity presents quite an optimistic view that contradicts more conventional feminist accounts of patriarchal dominance and women's subordination. Butler argues that gender identities are not natural or fixed - rather, they are only given meaning when acted out or performed. She shares Simone de Beauvoir's (1989) view that 'one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman' (Butler 1990: 270). Therefore, 'the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to per- formative acts within theatrical contexts' (Butler 1990: 272). Gender is a performance and how it is performed constitutes what it means to any given

society or culture in a particular historical moment. For example, many societies today value masculinity (being a man) above femininity (being a woman) but in others we have the reverse scenario - such as the matriarchal Mosuo community in southern China, in which a woman is predominantly the head of the family. Although gender is a process of *acting out* rather than being, it is nevertheless subject to social norms and conditions which restrict the range of gender performances it is feasible for individuals to enact. Gender play, as Butler calls it, is not a free-for-all. However, gender performances can be liberated from social norms if they are played in such a way as to provoke what Butler calls **gender trouble** - which is also the title of her book (Butler 1999, first published in 1990). What she means by this is that traditional lines of division between masculine and feminine identity are capable of being blurred and eroded by gender playing that subverts conventional sex differences; that amounts to troublesome gender performativity in the eyes of traditionalists. Conventional gender identities can be changed through gender play because 'identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler 1999: 33). In other words, there is no *natural* gender identity because it is forever enacted both before and after it can become natural or normalized.

Transsexual practices, transvestism and bisexuality are important ways to create gender trouble because they contradict normative femininities (and masculinities) predicated on reproductive heterosexuality. Moreover, media such as popular music provide valuable channels of dissemination for bastions of gender trouble, despite the fact that as discussed earlier in this chapter, mass media stereotyping of radical feminists only reinforces gender norms in line with patriarchal ideologies about what is and is not socially acceptable. Transsexuals and bisexuals - not to mention gay and lesbian sexualities - are rarely the subject of media representations, and on the few occasions when these 'alternative sexualities' are shown and discussed in mainstream media, they are usually misrepresented, in a way that is at best patronizing and, at worst, ridiculing. Mass media in the main are hardly recruiting agents for gender trouble. This absence of mainstream gender trouble has inspired Butler to write a sequel, *Undoing Gender* (2004), which imagines the meanings of sexual and gendered life freed from restrictive social norms. Butler's theory of gender trouble is not directly related to media and she does not deal with mediated performativity in any depth, but her ideas have filtered quite widely through media and cultural theory.

For example, Beverley Skeggs's (1993) interpretation of the early Madonna's music videos, such as 'Like a Virgin', suggests that she embodies gender trouble. In turn, Madonna's shows of lesbianism and autoeroticism hold the promise of radical, empowering implications for feminine identity. As Skeggs notes, 'By playing popular culture so well Madonna is able to use its spaces to make challenges . . . and break down the institutional barriers

constructed out of women's silence' (Skeggs 1993: 72). Another feminist scholar refers to the liberating impact of Madonna's ambiguous gender and sexuality in her videos and stage shows: 'She forces the spectator to question the boundaries of gender constructs and the cultural constraints on sexual themes and sexual fantasies' (Kaplan 1993: 157). Madonna is one of Butler's best performers of gender trouble, albeit presumably unknowingly. Moreover, Butler's liberating gender politics and gender-bending role models like Madonna proved to be iconic for a new generation of feminist perspectives to which we will now turn.