**Introduction**

This chapter will show why it is important to understand how the media represent gender. It will argue that constructions of femininity and masculinity are part of a dominant ideology that prescribes ‘proper’ behaviour for men and for women (Goffman, 1976; Macdonald, 1995). Central to such proper behaviour is to have the ‘correct’ sexuality. In the Western world dominant ideology, however, is not currently imposed on us dictatorially. There are varieties in proper
and less proper ways of being a woman or a man. There is room for different sexualities. The media, in their capacity of informing us about the world and as entertainers, show us an immense range of possibilities and practices of ‘doing gender’. The value attached to these varied possibilities is not equal, nor is it always possible for all of them to be shown. To be or become aware of the many ways in which gender can have meaning, and the weight attached to different forms in different contexts, is what we need to train in order to understand both the media and the societies in which they operate.

Why bother with gender in media studies? So much has changed in society since the Second World War. White middle-class women in the Western world are now aware that they have more options than to try and be a housewife and mother (with or without a part-time job). Non-White and working-class women are less punished for being ambitious beyond what used to be their social status (Skeggs, 1997). Men know how to change a diaper. Machines take care of cleaning dishes and clothes. This changed view of women’s role and social position, in place since the nineteenth century for middle and upper-class households, is marked by Friedan’s famous book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). It shows how in the early 1960s to be a woman meant that you lived in a fake world. A husband, a home and children were supposed to provide instant gratification but did not. It left women wondering whether that was all there was to live for. The ‘fakeness’ of the world was mostly produced in and through the media. Women’s magazines counselled readers that to be a mother was difficult but fulfilling. Romantic stories promised that heterosexual marriage was a state of bliss. News stories showed solely men who were politicians or important figures in the world of business. The genders were represented with a marked difference in the media.

Friedan and other feminist authors of the ‘second wave’, in Europe and the US, unleashed a powerful movement in the 1970s that redefined what it meant to be a woman. Instead of being ornaments in a man’s life or responsible for their offspring, women had options and could have careers, provided that childcare and home arrangements were to change. In many regards, the women’s movement was extraordinarily successful, if not in truly becoming a ‘rainbow coalition’ that brought together all kinds of women (hooks, 1994). Media representations did change in the wake of social change and became more diverse, although the systematic oppression of human beings based on their gender has remained an issue. Female circumcision is but one gruesome human rights example that we know of via documentary film and news stories. The fact that women all over the world, including the West, are paid systematically less than men for the same work, is another regularly repeated news item.
Box 8.1  Hearth and home

In a famous large-scale study in the early 1970s, Tuchman (1978) showed that women made up a significant part of the North-American work force. The media however, depicted them solely in domestic roles, in relation to men, their husbands, fathers, brothers. She suggested that women were 'symbolically annihilated' by the media. In turn, that would provide young women with an entirely skewed notion of what society needed from them when they grew up. It would not prepare them adequately. Underlying the symbolic annihilation-thesis is the idea that the media provide 'role models'. Given the right role models, girls would behave less 'girlishly' and stop under-achieving in order to do well in the marriage market. Gender, argued feminists such as Scheu, a German researcher, and de Beauvoir, a French philosopher and novelist, was not imprinted on one's genes. It was de Beauvoir who famously remarked: 'On ne naît pas femme: on le devient' (One is not born a woman, one becomes one) in Le Deuxième Sexe (1949). Scheu and many others echoed this observation in books that after 30 years are still in print, for example, Scheu's Wir werden nicht als Mädchen geboren, wir werden dazu gemacht [We Are Not Born Girls], first published in 1977. Although the role model theory is seen as somewhat less than adequate today, it is still an important political tool. It fits well enough with discussion today that suggests that gender is a social construction that is build and rebuild as it were, in different situations and contexts. This points to the need to understand the codes, conventions and rules that make up 'gender' in a specific time and place.

'Musculinity'

The lives of men and the representation of masculinity changed as much as the equivalent for women over the last half of the twentieth century. Former bread-winners and heads of the household, men found that their bodies too could be commercially exploited. Although the male suit remains today's chain mail, undressed male bodies are widely on public display. Going by popular television drama, the average actor has to spend considerable time in a gym to tone muscles and gain the required 'strong' look. Ridge Forrester, in the long-running American soap opera The Bold and the Beautiful, provides such an example. ‘Musculinity’ became the norm for such genres as the action film, according to Tasker (1993). First Hollywood and then the other world cinemas
(from Bollywood to Asian film) reacted to the changes wrought in our perception of men and masculinity by the feminist critique of the 1960s through to the 1980s. For straight men, the new challenge was to be both caring and strong, and above all, to look good. The off-jokes that Bruce Willis’s and Mel Gibson’s characters make in the *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* film series, attest to the exercise required in building a new masculine ideal of such widely disparate elements. The love lives of the characters they play moreover, attest to the quite spectacular lengths they have to go to, to find and live up to the standards set by the women they find attractive.

The twenty-first century is not a feminist Valhalla. It may be for some, but for most it is not. Gender, for both men and women, still consists of a complex set of rules, distinctions and ideals that are difficult to live up to. It requires extensive cultural knowledge to know what behaviour and dress style are appropriate under specific circumstances. The media guide us in this regard. They offer examples of what is ‘done’, and what not, of how to combine different types of gendered behaviour. They teach us how to enjoy both traditional and innovative ways of dealing with gender, and offer examples for us to discuss with others. In itself this is enough of an argument to bother with how the media represent gender. By informing us and entertaining us, the media implicitly teach us about proper gendered behaviour as much as how to resist and subvert gendered codes. Learning how to decode media messages about gender is enriching for any television viewer, women’s magazine or newspaper reader. It is an especially good test case for young and up-and-coming media professionals to test and train their cultural awareness and sensitivity.

There is a second good argument to bother with gender, and with representation of gender in the media. Regardless of social change since second-wave feminism, and whether and how gender is a source of oppression, there is the systematization of the difference between femininity and masculinity that is embedded in media representations. A half-naked woman in a rap video offering herself for (symbolic) consumption is not necessarily in itself problematic. Bubbling in rap shows us impressive and powerful women. Nor is it a problem that women in positions of power in drama series are either bitches or mothers. Taken together, however, they point to how femininity is defined in terms of sexuality, rather than, say, professionalism. While this may not have direct consequences for real people, the implicit message is part of a wider system of codes that is hardly beneficial to the chances for half of the population if they want to be taken seriously as anything other than a sexual being: nun or whore; virgin, mother or slut.

Likewise with the representations of masculinity. What sex does for the representation of femininity, power does for masculinity. This works in a slightly
different way. Masculinity, much more than femininity, is always invested with hierarchical difference. Whether it is the rapper versus the women around him, the detached professionalism of CTU agent Jack Bauer in 24 (Fox TV) which allows him to be far more violent than other agents, or the knowledgeable and experienced authority of the chef de clinique in hospital series, power is the key ingredient for successful masculinity. Just imagine what would have happened to a less powerful figure than the president of the US if you are a public official who is caught having seedy affairs and lying about them. It is generally not easy if, as a man, you do not belong to the top dogs. If you are too young, or too old, if you are gay or not White, your chances of being taken seriously, like those of women, are slimmer the more you divert from the White, heterosexual, male norm (Segal, 1990).

Of course, there are plenty of men who are lust objects (America’s Temptation Island, or the yearly male pin-up calendars published by fire brigades for fundraising purposes are but two examples) and who are defined in sexual terms. Authoritative women can easily be found who have more balls than the guys around them (true of many a woman politician) (van Zoonen, 2005). Cultural logic does not define individual women or men in their entirety. Rather, all men and women are individually defined by pretty much unique mixes of masculine and feminine qualities. Individuality, the unique mix we partly orchestrate ourselves and partly find ourselves in, is pulled however, towards conventional criteria for our gender. However creative or innovative we are, or however little we intend to mean by the headscarf, the mini skirt, the suit or cowboy boots we wear, dominant frames of interpretation in a relentless either/or logic impose gendered identities on us.

In Western society, we like to set store by individualism and individual examples. To point to underlying cultural logics is easily disqualified as not doing justice to individuals and their solutions. Or it is seen as being overly politically correct. So be it. The point is not that femininity is the inescapable fate of any woman, or masculinity that of all men, rather, the point is that similar practices (wearing make-up, or a skirt, sporting a moustache) signify differently for women and for men. Moreover, as interpreting someone’s ‘look’ is done by other persons who have their own cultural knowledge and experience, the make-up, the skirt, the facial hair, may be given different meanings or different weight. Last but not least, interpreting cultural codes always involves decoding sets of clues, that may well point in different directions or outright contradict one another. The shadow of a moustache on a dark-haired girl in a sexy dress is more easily overlooked than body hair in some parts of male gay subculture.

Therefore, acquiring a certain sensitivity to how gender is an important social structure to all of us, is not easy. It does matter. Differences that are made
systematically are strong forces of inclusion and exclusion, and of [self] censorship. It matters secondly, because social and cultural differences are linked. Gender difference is often understood as an original distinction, drawing on such sources as the Bible. It would seem to be indisputable and natural, like the one between man and matter. But just as we are both objects and beings, it is questionable whether the original difference is the one between men and women. Not just because many hybrid forms exist (hermaphrodites, for example) but because it can be argued that all identities, including gender identities need to be performed to exist. Butler, a renowned queer theorist, uses the example of drag (cross-gender dressing) to make her case. Drag, she states, 'enacts the very structure of impersonation by which any gender is assumed' (Butler, 1991: 21). We do not go about stark naked, we dress ourselves. Because social contexts differ, we style how we dress as much as how we behave. We thus, mundanely, appropriate and theatricalize gender. 'If this is true', says Butler, 'it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original' (1991: 21) (italics in original).

As this is part of an essay in which Butler explores what being a lesbian means, she goes on to discuss how 'the “reality” of heterosexual identity is performatively constituted. Heterosexuality, after all, needs gender difference more than other sexualities. As an imitation that has no original, heterosexuality is always in the business of living up to a fantasy of what it might be. It is, according to queer theory, a project that is bound to fail because people differ in their taste and preferences in their sex lives as much as in other regards. It is also quite difficult for men to perform to the standards set by the norm. Much to the angry regret of viewers of Sex and the City, neither of Carrie’s two main love interests live up to it. ‘When Big showed up looking all broken and pathetic at Aidan’s country house to cry over that movie star lady, that was pretty much it for me. I’ve always looked at Big like Mr. Macho, cool as a cucumber, and that episode made him look about as cool as a wet noodle [www.jumptotheshark.com, 2006].’ Suggesting that heterosexuality is the one and only original sexuality is a doomed project. It works well however in creating the kind of distinction that nation-states have a vested interest in (Donzelot, 1979; Foucault, 1977). It privileges families and child birth (future citizens, child-bearers, soldiers, workers and consumers). It is important in regulating and disciplining populations (Foucault, 1979). Because it is such a useful fiction, it is repeated again and again, implying in its wake a much bigger difference between men and women than actually exists.

By understanding gender as the crucially important difference between men and women, heterosexuality maintains itself as absolute norm. Fortunately this is
never an entirely successful project. We recognize many other sexualities, which in a range of contexts may be appreciated and legitimate. While masculinity in many ways is defined as how not to appear to be gay (a wimp or queer), a range of queer identities has nonetheless become available, starting with the new men of the early 1980s who wore make-up and flirted with both sexes. Bands such as Pet Shop Boys (Maus, 2001) and performers such as Boy George are key examples. Box 8.2 gives another type of example of how we understand the difference between men and women as fundamental and as the norm, but, at the same time, hugely enjoy the subversion of that norm. It is concerned with the ongoing attraction of presenting characters in drag in (mainstream) cinema.

Box 8.2  Why is drag sexy?

Film culture has given us a vast range of men in drag. Interestingly, these men are often more than comic figures, however awkwardly they move around in a dress, proving how difficult it is to perform femininity well. They charm us. They convince us, contradictorily, of their masculinity in a romantic scenario. In some cases they allow us to be moved by the drama of dichotomous identity: Some Like it Hot (dir. Billy Wilder, 1959); Tootsie (with Dustin Hoffman, dir. Sydney Pollack, 1982), The Birdcage/La Cage aux Folles (with Robin Williams, dir. Mike Nichols, 1996), The Crying Game (with Jaye Davidson, dir. Neil Jordan, 1992) are but the obvious examples.

Women too overstep and challenge boundaries, and are 'more than meets the eye', by pretending to be men. Victor Victoria (with Julie Andrews, dir. Blake Edwards, 1982) is an example; as is Orlando in Virginia Woolf's novel, or the two central characters in Tipping the Velvet (BBC television, 2002). The shifting of codes makes room for unlawful interpretations and possibilities; the usual prohibitions do not hold. A woman in a suit suggests she is playing hard to get, making the chase more exciting. Men in skirts make themselves more freely available for sexual fantasy than men 'protected' by pants, and certainly than those encapsulated in a suit and tie.

Gender and genre

The rules guiding representation of gender are complex. Take, for instance, a newsreader. Newsreaders need to have neutral faces, after all, news
programmes are supposed to inform us and support processes of opinion formation. However, in competitive television environments news anchors may need more than a neutral face or to exude authority. They may need to be sexy as well. Or, if one of the competing partners is public broadcasting, yet another type of appeal may be called for. In the Netherlands, for example, a host of women newsreaders was hired in the 1980s, just before the Dutch broadcasting system was opened to commercial stations. These women, argues van Zoonen, were hardly chosen for being sexy. Rather, they provided another type of authority. They were busty maternal types, putting the nation to bed after a hectic day (van Zoonen, 1991, and see Holland, 1987).

Generally, genre codes prescribe gender expectations in the media. Genre does more of course. Neale (1980) has famously defined genre as the contract between audiences and producers. Having an idea of what you can expect makes it easier to fully enjoy a series, a documentary or a quiz. Knowing the rules is half the fun. Genre conventions regulate how a story is told, or how a quiz is to be played, or what constitutes valid evidence in a documentary. Included in those rules is who can be a hero, a contestant, a host or an expert. Experts, for instance, are often men. Think of Dr. Phil, formerly Oprah Winfrey’s expert psychologist, now a show host in his own right. When the expert is a woman, dress code is important. Cleavage or bare leg tend to undermine the expert’s credibility. Despite such old stereotypes as the fuzzy professor, we expect our experts to be sharp, able to deliver judgements and information in short sound bites and, most of all, not to distract our attention onto themselves. They need to disappear behind their expertize to be the disembodied voices of science and reason.

The nexus of gender and genre also produces specific pleasures for us as media audience members. As both gender and genre are complex constructions, the pleasures involved in making media content meaningful are layered and of different orders. There is, first of all, the simple pleasure of recognition, of understanding the logic of a programme, a game or a magazine. Second, there is the pleasure of understanding how any one cultural text itself will contain different storylines, for example, or be host to a set of conflicting norms and values, embedded in relationships between characters. Third, in reading a book or viewing a film, we are often aware of references to other texts, to historical events or persons in the ‘real’ world. Such intertextual references may add yet another kind of pleasure. In addition, all of these different kinds of recognizing what a film, game or book are all about, may point to one another and twist what at first sight may have appeared to be forthright definitions of gender or implementations of genre rules.
Although, as Johnson has argued in *Everything Bad is Good For You* (2006), we have become incredible smart audiences, our media literacy does not extend to the ability to discuss well what it is we like and what we think media texts are about. Johnson’s examples are concerned with, amongst other things, games and television drama. By using simple graphics Johnson shows convincingly that popular television drama has become much more complex over a quarter century. Whereas series such as *Starsky and Hutch* only had a small number of storylines per episode, many a popular drama series after the millennium will have more than ten storylines going on in any one episode. The interesting thing of course is that day-time soap opera has a long pedigree of what Johnson calls ‘multi-threading’ (see also Modleski, 1982; Newcomb, 1974). The innovation, according to him, came with *Hill Street Blues*, a police series. ‘Bochco’s genius with Hill Street was to marry complex narrative structure with complex subject matter’ (Johnson, 2005: 68). While *Dallas*, in Johnson’s recapitulation, had shown that soap opera’s interweaving of many storylines could survive week-long interruptions, and sit coms such as *All in the Family* had tackled difficult social issues, *Hill Street Blues* combined ‘richly drawn characters confronting difficult social issues, and a narrative structure to match’ (ibid).

Television, a key mass medium, has offered us more and more complex pleasures, which attests to a mostly unnoticed development amongst audiences. We have become much smarter in decoding difficult content. Unfortunately we have also been quite complacent about this. We manage to be smart viewers and stupid public debaters, who hold on to simplified notions about the mass media in general, witness discussion of children and media, and to simplified notions of social structures, be they gender, class, ethnicity or nationality. This is partly due to another article of faith; that you should not spoil your pleasures in entertainment by analysing them too closely. Partly it also has to with the dominance of what Hartley has called ‘the knowledge class’ (1999). Those of us who are or will be teachers, for example, benefit from hierarchical knowledge structures that appoint us as guardians of truth and insight. Television as well as other media compete for the attention of audiences.

But constructions of gender difference, of traditional femininity and masculinity do not either appear or disappear under closer scrutiny, they are there all the time. Nor does the pleasure in any kind of entertainment dissolve when one is able to analyze and discuss it. Arguably, even what are referred to as ‘guilty pleasures’ (I should be doing something more useful with my time) may gain legitimacy or prestige under conditions of public media literacy. To show the interlinked layers of understanding and enjoying media texts and how they construct gender roles, the following will offer two examples. The first concerns
women characters in police series, and focuses on how women may be portrayed as professionals. Interesting work on women as victims in such genres, also exists.

Box 8.3 Women as heroes and as victims

The police series is an interesting and long-running television genre. It can be argued to be a domain of oppression for women. In Rape on Prime Time, Cuklanz (2000) shows that most of the victims in police series are women, while sexual crimes are one of the most important categories of misdoing. Police series are also a domain in which television has engaged with feminism by introducing women characters as police officers. Sometimes they suggest that women's emancipation is fully achieved and that women can be fully integrated and respected members of the force. There are, however, also examples of series that show how lonely and difficult it is to be a woman in a male-dominated world. The BBC series Prime Suspect (1990–2006) was known for its exciting and provocative portrayal of detective Jane Tennison. She was ambitious and worked all hours, putting her work before her private life at all times. Although understandably hardened by her experience of being excluded by the guys, she came, at times, uncomfortably close to a stereotypical harridan.

While bearing in mind that it is hardly television's project to be a progressive social force, it is of interest to see how sheer industrial dynamics have forced the medium to continue innovating (cf. Caldwell, 1987). The police series example below will show how this includes the level of storylines and characterization. The second example deals with men's magazines. Although a long-existing (sub) genre in the magazine market, only recently men's magazines have come to be a gendered umbrella genre, which women's magazines have long been. The importance of such an example is in showing how highly traditionally gendered content, such as that offered by so-called 'lads' magazines' may, at the same time, show how masculinity is as much a gender as femininity, rather than an ungendered norm for all.

Gender and professionalism: the police series

Women have always had a strong presence in crime fiction. Although crime is related to violence, which is commonly associated with masculinity, women
have always been authors of crime fiction (Agatha Christie, for example), and literary creations in it. Although outnumbered by men, women detectives have never been absent from the end of the nineteenth century onwards (Swanson and James, 1996), able to voice a wide range of perspectives. In television too, generally most law enforcers are men. But Pepper (in *Police Woman*, NBC, 1974–78) or *Charlie’s Angels* (ABC, 1976–81) prove that too pessimistic a view of women’s role as police officers and private investigators is not historically correct. From the spinster detective such as Miss Marple to Charlie’s Angels women have both been cast within and against stereotype. Sometimes using the authority of the spinster, so reminiscent of the figure of the governess or the elderly teacher in charge of both Order and Truth; sometimes using the appeal of the tom boy, making use, at least partly, of the ‘drag’ factor. More recently, women characters took in feminist social criticism. *Prime Suspect*’s Jane Tennison (BBC, 1990–2006), for example, was a strong mix of sexy femininity (fired by actress Helen Mirren’s status and reputation), feminist will to power and the tragedy of being a lone woman outsider in a male police force (Brunsdon, 1998).

Crime and action drama clearly shows the importance of recognizing the subtlety and context-relatedness of gender distinctions in specific genres, which shift with the different layers in the text. Gender distinctions unfold between three rather than two poles, to start with. Detectives are not just either man or woman; it matters also whether or not they are feminists. As a result we have characters who have feminine, masculine and feminist traits in different degrees. Generic rules, in addition, offer a range of possibilities taking us in different directions, be they action-adventure, police procedural or the psychological thriller. Suspense is important to all but in varying degrees and in different ways. Film is often more subtle than television. Some action is also part of most crime drama.

Politics, on the other hand, mark a quite sharp line of distinction. State politics are more to be found in film than television, and clearly have a masculine leaning. An example would be *Enemy of the State* (1996, Tony Scott, USA, starring Will Smith), or, on television, *24* (Fox, 2001 – present), starring Kiefer Sutherland as Jack Bauer. Local politics and social movement issues, on the other hand, have been mostly taken up by women authors and protagonists in novels rather than on the small or on the big screen. An example would be the feminist private investigators of the 1980s, such as journalist Lindsay Gordon (by author Val McDermid). The socialist-feminist backgrounds of these new women heroes for a long time kept them from becoming financially successful in their line of work. They had become sleuths after all because of their ideals and not for the money. Only in the 1990s did authors such as Marcia Muller
allow her heroine to become an employer and managing director of a well-earning detective agency.

Women then may have a strong presence in a male field. Femininity is sometimes an asset to them. It is, however, always combined with a sharp intelligence, and often with effective fighting technique. What makes this example especially interesting is how gender distinctions (both as feminine versus masculine and as feminist or non-feminist) relate to and infuse professionalism. The mark of a strong professional in fiction is often that this is a figure who in many ways is beyond gender distinction. Often they are single – married, for better or worse, to the jobs that they are dedicated to. Inspector Morse, for example (Thomas, 1997) is mostly unlucky in love. His considerable powers of deduction are directed at work, rather than at such frivolities as dating or sex. Inspector Frost (A Touch of Frost) is a widower who never puts a girl before the job. Sam Ryan in Silent Witness (1997–2004) communicates more easily with the dead she lovingly examines than with living human beings. Dedication and a strong sense of justice mark professionalism in all kinds of crime drama. True dedication is a mix of motherly and fatherly care: it involves both a certain tenderness and feeling both for persons involved and for relations between human beings. But there is also cold logic, anger and unrelenting pressure on those suspected of not telling the truth or committing a crime. All in all, professionalism can be defined beyond gender, suggesting that contrary to deeply embedded ideological convictions, gender does not always matter. Gendered qualities can be shared between the sexes. Television allows us to see and understand it by layering in these different viewpoints in its narratives.

Box 8.4 24 and fatherhood

Gender is most directly marked by reference to femininity and masculinity and to sexual codes. Immediately after these, gender is marked by the difference between men and women as parents. The expectations we have of mothers have to do with warmth, comfort, softness and being there. Fathers on the other hand can be mostly absent. They can be authoritarian figures abiding by strict rules or they may use humour to prevent becoming too involved emotionally in genres such as the television comedy. In the action series 24 the main character Jack Bauer presents a new twist to how gendered codes and conventions are always under pressure to adapt, however slowly, to social change. From Season 2 onwards, Bauer is a single parent to his teenage daughter.
Kim. We have gotten to know Kim as the quintessential silly girl. She takes up with the wrong friends endangering her entire family as well as herself. Hated by many a 24 fan, Kim Bauer takes stupidity to new heights in the second season. She meets with a mad hermit, a cougar, and is involved in a convenience store hold-up. Her father meanwhile is busy saving the US from a nuclear device. Only at the end of the season the two are to be united again. Although in later 24 series too, Kim proves to be a remarkable idiot and Jack an absentee father, there is a strong sense of connection between these two. For those interested in rethinking parenting, Jack Bauer as a character suggests that fatherly care might involve having your children learn by experience to deal with life itself, and making yourself available for sound advice by new mobile communication technologies. After all, in later seasons, Kim returns, to be an agent in the unit her father initially worked for. It bears thinking about whether she presents an argument in an ongoing debate about the status of children, whether and how they should be granted status as independent persons, and what care, ideally, they should receive. When conceived of as a layered text, 24 can be shown to offer arguments in favour and against such a thesis.

Men’s magazines: gender as a contradictory system of rules

If women can have a strong presence in a male genre such as the police series, can men infiltrate in women’s genres in the same way? Given historical power dynamics between masculinity and femininity, it would seem to be less likely for men to move into feminine, by definition, lower-status genres. After all, the dominance of masculinity over femininity was defined in terms of masculinity being ‘the norm’. It needed no further definition. White, heterosexual, physically healthy and unemotional manhood set the standard for ‘mankind’. A standard failed by all of those who deviated from it. They are called women, perverts, wimps, Chinks, Niggers. With amazing cruelty there was, and in many ways still is, little room for being ‘different’, whether that be more emotional, shorter or taller than what is deemed normal, to be gay, non-White or physically or mentally disabled.

Men’s magazines mark an interesting exception to the rule that status governs what media products will have a chance with audiences. Commercial
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magazine publishing in the Netherlands did not, until the late 1990s, really recognise such a thing as ‘men’s magazines’ apart from (semi) pornographic publications such as Playboy and Penthouse. There were ‘family magazines’ that catered quite clearly more to fathers than to mothers and included male sensationalist reporting and humour side-by-side. War and crime stories combined with sexist jokes and general interest articles that addressed business and social misdoing.

The 1990s saw the introduction of new man and lad magazines produced in the US and in the UK (Benwell, 2003). The logic of media production subsequently sees them franchised all over the world. The new man is inspired by feminism, he is softer and not afraid to show his emotions. Not only can men have feelings, but these feelings matter. The contrast here is with a broad understanding of manliness as providing society with its moral definition, based in public duty, morality, standards and moral restraint. The codes of journalism in quality newspapers still attest to these very norms.

Magazines such as Arena (UK, 1986–), L’Uomo (Italy), Vogue Hommes or the American restyled GQ (Gentleman’s Quarterly), broke with an older understanding of masculinity and addressed the ‘new man’. Although most often straight, they catered to men who were interested in (men’s) fashion and cosmetics, who were ‘into consumption’, formerly an exclusively feminine domain. The mid-1990s saw the introduction of Loaded, again a men’s lifestyle glossy but now full of an aggressively heterosexual, ‘laddist’ rhetoric. As glossy however, Loaded too took on board the changes wrought in how we think and practise gender inspired by feminism and the new man. Like its counterpart FHM (For Him Magazine) it suggests that masculinity, far from hiding in anonymity as the ‘norm’ for all human beings, is asserting itself in its own, not always very pleasant right. They show that how one is to be a ‘man’, is as dependent on historical period and circumstance as is practising femininity. And even more interestingly, they show how an older patriarchal logic that defined masculinity as all things non-feminine (neither weak, nor emotional, nor over involved or too taken with appearances) is no longer in place. Real men do not only eat quiche, they use moisturizers and anti-wrinkle cream while discussing women’s physical attributes.

In the end the laddist lifestyle magazines differ considerably from women’s magazines. They mostly do so by their insistent use of irony and humorous insult. Moreover, on the letter’s pages, and in the advice given by the magazines, little private or personal knowledge is exchanged. Benwell argues that ‘(m)agazines in general may be seen to fulfil this function of private
communication within the public sphere; but in men’s lifestyle magazines the denial of the private sphere is marked (2001: 22). They contain none of the real-life drama or the incitement to empathy and emotional learning that characterize women’s magazines. The letters’ pages of Loaded, for example, are marked, notes Benwell, by swearing and expletives. The end result of this exercise is the reinforcement of traditional masculinity. Women and gay men are kept at a distance, all reference to the possibility of homosexual desire is disavowed. Swearing references strength and rebellion. But while rebelling against feminism, traditional masculinity has allowed itself to be lured into ‘the open’. Nowhere else is it as clear that to understand media representations of gender, we must recognize how media texts are layered and always part of broader historical-discursive systems. The result is that Loaded and FHM, or Gullit, a Dutch, celebrity-branded copycat laddist lifestyle magazine, are in some regards extremely funny and a strong force against self-righteous political correctness, while in other regards they are insulting and frequently disgusting. The editors of the new lad magazines will doubtlessly be delighted with this evaluation.

**Conclusion**

The media representation of gender consists of a complex system of codes, conventions and rules. Together they produce a version of what societies are about. Tellingly, in quantitative research, it is still the case that the media go with the powerful and give us two times more men and male bodies than women (Monitor Diversiteit, 2002) despite soaps, despite women’s magazines, comedy series or new types of populist news or civic journalism. There is now far more room for individual women to be portrayed differently and in their own right. The same goes for gay women and men, although homosexuality is still ruled by what was called symbolic annihilation in the 1970s and 1980s.

It is as if the representation of gender follows the logic of playing an accordion. As easily as it unfolds, it will fold again to the tune of dominant ideologies. This entails that as media scholars we need to understand generic rules in relation to specific contexts. We need to unearth what gender meanings are embedded in both fiction and non-fiction media content to recognize when and where they may be actualized and where they remain dormant. Second, we
need to understand how, for audiences, it is dependent on their [local] knowledges, what meanings and layers in a media text are 'activated' and what meaning they are given.

Recently, a rerun of the witty American sit-com *Will and Grace*, featuring two gay men and two straight women in Manhattan, New York as its central characters, followed right on the heels of a news item about a gay pride rally in Moscow. The march had been banned because it was claimed by the authorities that it could trigger violence. A courageous group took to the streets nonetheless where they were met by nationalist and Orthodox Christian groups chanting anti-gay slogans and shouting abuse. The naked hatred in the faces of these bystanders was echoed in the words of the Moscow mayor who said he believed homosexuality was not natural and that a gay pride event would cause outrage in society. (http://news.bbc.co.uk, 27 May 2006 ‘Banned Moscow gay rally broken up’).

History teaches us that the reactionary response in Moscow against gay people is as easily marshalled against women claiming individual rights. As a Western viewer I am in a privileged position to be able to ‘read’ both *Will and Grace* and the news item about this rally. It is unlikely that this would be true for the Russian anti-gay protesters. What is needed therefore is the ability to decode media texts and sensitivity to its layeredness. These may well present any number of contradictory 'messages'. In addition we need to understand how media representations are not only in themselves constructions of particular realities but that they are decoded by others in other ways than we would.

**Summary**

- Gender is about femininity, masculinity, sexuality and power.
- We understand gender via media representations through our (implicit) knowledge of codes and conventions.
- The Western world allows for an amazing range of definitions and practices, all with their own codes and conventions.
- Under pressure, and in other places, neither this range nor the individual freedom that comes with it may be available.
- The media have been, and can again be, part of an authoritative and totalitarian gender regime.
GOING FURTHER

Journals that are of interest by presenting contemporary case study examples:

- Media and cultural studies journals generally

As well as:

- Feminist Media Studies
- European Journal of Women’s studies
- Journal of Popular Culture

Many monographs exist that deal with the representation of gender in media genres. On soap opera, for example, there is Ien Ang’s study of Dallas (1985), and Christine Geragthy’s (1991) overview of both American and British soaps. Men’s magazines too are a rich field with studies that focus on history and content [Masculinity and Men’s Lifestyle Magazines, 2003 by Benwell]; content and reception practices [Making Sense of Men’s Magazines, 2001 by Jackson et al.]; and on production [Representing Men: Cultural Production and Producers in the Men’s Magazine Market, 2004, by Crewe].

For other further reading the following texts may be of use

This book is somewhat exceptional in that it combines diverse reception case studies with discussion of media representation of gender.

One of the most accessible introductions and overviews of discussion.

This classic text situates questions of images and representation of gender in a broader context including media production and feminist media theory.

References


MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE: GENDER


