Gender & Pop Culture
A Text-Reader
Adrienne Trier-Bieniek
Valencia College, Orlando, USA

and

Patricia Leavy (Eds.)

Gender & Pop Culture provides a foundation for the study of gender, pop culture and media. This comprehensive, interdisciplinary text provides textbook style introductory and concluding chapters written by the editors, seven original contributor chapters on key topics and written in a variety of writing styles, discussion questions, additional resources and more. Coverage includes:

- Foundations for studying gender & pop culture (history, theory, methods, key concepts)
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Sut Jhally, Professor of Communication, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Founder & Executive Director, Media Education Foundation

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Gender & Pop Culture
Scope
The Teaching Gender publishes monographs, anthologies and reference books that deal centrally with gender and/or sexuality. The books are intended to be used in undergraduate and graduate classes across the disciplines. The series aims to promote social justice with an emphasis on feminist, multicultural and critical perspectives.

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Gender & Pop Culture

A Text-Reader

Edited by
Adrienne Trier-Bieniek
Valencia College, Orlando, USA

and

Patricia Leavy
Praise for Gender & Pop Culture

“The timely, well-written pieces in Gender & Pop Culture manage to convey some of the intellectual excitement—and dare I say it, fun—that the best in media studies and feminism can stimulate. Students and scholars alike will appreciate how the wide-ranging chapters in this volume provide greater depth and context to some of the great debates of our time about the ‘effects of media’ that take place every day in university classrooms and around kitchen tables. This should be required reading for anyone who’s ever watched TV, gone to a movie or put on a pair of headphones!”

Jackson Katz, Ph.D., creator of Tough Guise 2: Violence, Manhood and American Culture and author of The Macho Paradox

“An important addition to the fields of gender and media studies, this excellent compilation will be useful to students and teachers in a wide range of disciplines. The research is solid, the examples from popular culture are current and interesting, and the conclusions are original and illuminating. It is certain to stimulate self-reflection and lively discussion.”

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Sut Jhally, Professor of Communication, University of Massachusetts at Amherst Founder & Executive Director, Media Education Foundation
“Gender & Pop Culture takes no prisoners in describing the influences of patriarchy on a wide range of media. With up-to-date examples, strongly worded arguments, and ideas for resistance, these chapters are sure classroom conversation starters.”

Lisa Wade, Founder of Sociological Images and Professor at Occidental College

“This important new book by Trier-Bieniek & Leavy bursts off the pages with a devastating combination of age-old statistics and shocking new examples of gender-based inequities in popular culture. Trier-Bieniek & Leavy take readers on a walk through the very real continuing gender inequalities upon which cultural knowledge is constructed, demonstrating the pressing need for new approaches to this area of study. This book provides not only up-to-the-minute worldwide pop culture exemplars, but a clear-eyed overview of methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks for studying gender and pop culture that will be useful for novices to expert researchers in a range of disciplines. In addition, teachers, scholars and researchers will be thankful for the book’s pick-up-and-go approach which includes additional resources, suggested readings, links to digital assets, activities, and problem-based learning exercises. Buy this book now!”

Anne Harris, Filmmaker and Professor at Monash University
Adrienne’s Dedication
For Angie Moe, the greatest mentor a girl could ask for. And for Catherine Kelly, an amazing nurse, an even better friend and the Amy Poehler to my Tina Fey.

Patricia’s Dedication
For Madeline, the most amazing daughter any mother could hope for. You are so strong, talented, kind, smart and funny. I love you to bits and I’m bursting with pride.
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During the 2013 Academy Awards, filmmaker Brenda Chapman accepted the Best Animated Film award for *Brave*, the story of a Scottish girl who eschews a tradition that requires her to marry a suitor of her parents’ choosing. *Brave* put a new spin on the contemporary princess story. Gone was the ideal of beauty found in many of Disney’s princesses, the long flowing hair, big doe-eyed looks, hour-glass figure and perfect smile. Merida, *Brave*’s princess, had curly red hair that was tangled more times than not, a freckled face free of makeup, and her dress was torn from days spent practicing archery, riding horses and climbing rocks. Merida’s frame was gangly, awkward and everything a pre-teen and teen girl embodies. In short, for an animated character, she was realistic. Further, differing from most princess movies, her goal was not to find a husband but rather to find herself and mend her relationship with her mother.

A few months later, in the summer of 2013, Disney revealed a makeover for the character of Merida for her official induction as a Disney Princess. The makeover created a very different Merida. Gone were the tight curls of hair, the freckles and the gangly awkward smile. The new Merida had flowing red hair, large blue eyes which were highlighted with makeup and drawn with a distinct sensuality. Her bust was increased, her waist decreased and her dress was designed to flaunt her newly constructed figure. While some saw this as a necessary step in marketing a Disney Princess, many (including Chapman) saw the change as a concession to the unrealistic and homogenous standards of beauty which are consistently forced on girls. The backlash against the “new” Merida was swift. The website *A Mighty Girl* created a petition on Change.org titled “Disney: No to the Merida Make-Over! Keep Our Hero Brave!” Chapman herself wrote an open letter on the *Huffington Post* declaring,

I created Merida for my daughter — inspired by her strong-willed spirit — of which I am in complete awe and very proud. But
despite my best efforts to guide her away from what media images and female stereotypes say to our children, it breaks my heart when she thinks she is too fat or too ugly because she doesn’t look like a certain TV star or that “other girl” who is so much more beautiful in her mind. The majority of our children feel that way, and lack self-esteem about their own looks because of issues exactly like this one. (Chapman, 2013 para 6)

The petition at Change.org received over a quarter of a million signatures, leading Disney to take down the re-designed Merida and issue a statement that the new Merida was only created as a limited edition image. They conceded that the original image of Merida would remain on Disney merchandise.

The example of *Brave*, Merida, and Disney Princesses reveals many issues relating to gender and pop culture. This brief example can be used to illustrate the social construction of gender, mass media’s impact on gender, and the power of media activism. Therefore, we provide *Brave* as a jumping-off point for this text.

**How can we understand gender?**

It is important to begin by distinguishing sex and gender as those terms are often mistakenly taken as synonyms. Sex is biological; it is physiologically what prompts us to be assigned as male or female. Gender is socially constructed; it consists of the ideas we have about masculinity and femininity and how we apply these notions to people based on their designated sex assignment. Judith Lorber (1994; 2008) explains that gender is a set of culturally-specific meanings attached to a person because of their sex assignment. So, if your biological sex is male, you are expected to enact masculinity as defined by your society in a given historical time. To put it another way, the current fashion trend in the U.S. in 2013 is for women to wear “skinny jeans” while men’s styles remain baggy. This is an acceptable way to display masculine and feminine traits. When the style is reversed with women in baggy clothes and men in tight jeans comments may arise which signal gender confusion, such as “Why are you wearing girls’ pants?”
Keep in mind that we are presenting a binary view of sex for the sake of this discussion; however, it is important to acknowledge intersexuality and “intersexed bodies” (please see Anne Fausto-Sterling, 1993 and Suzanne Kessler’s, 1997).

The social construction of gender is significant and perhaps the single agreed upon principle in feminism, an expansive field constituted by diverse thought. This can be difficult to fully grasp because, as Judith Lorber notes, “Talking about gender for most people is the equivalent of fish talking about water (1994 as quoted in 2007, p. 141).” Gender takes on the appearance of naturalness. Our environments are very difficult to perceive when we are inside of them and so it is difficult to recognize how our realities are socially constructed, especially with regard to gender because it becomes naturalized. Gender appears like we were just born that way, that sex and gender are the same. Because it is hard to see, it is important that we expand on what it means to claim gender is socially constructed. Stephen Pfohl (2008) theorizes the core of constructionism as follows:

“Things are… partially shaped and provisionally organized by the complex ways in which we are ritually positioned in relation to each other and to the objects we behold materially, symbolically, and in the imaginary realm. The ritual historical positioning of humans in relation to cultural objects and stories that we both make and are made over by—this, perhaps, is the elementary form of an effective social construction. This elementary form casts a circle of believability around artificially constructed accounts of the world. At the same time, the believability of the social constructions that lie inside the circle depends on what the circle expels to the outside. In this sense, social constructions are, at once, constituted and haunted by what they exclude.” (pp. 645-646)

Social constructions both include and exclude; they tell and show us what is normative and what is deemed deviant. The social constructions become like water to a fish, so much a part of our environment that they appear normal or just “the way things are” and are consequently taken for granted.
One dangerous part of social constructions is that phenomena can become oversimplified. For example, gender, (our ideas about masculinity and femininity), becomes stereotyped and overgeneralized. In our culture, social constructions create a gender binary where masculinity and femininity are seen as polar opposites. Some feelings, behaviors, preferences, and skills are attributed to females and others to males. When people cross those lines they can be subject to ridicule or worse. For example, there are often representations of males in situation comedies where male characters are shown to be incompetent in childcare or housework, and this in turn becomes the source of comedy. Another common example is that female characters in films are typically obsessed with their romantic relationships and can even appear “psycho” as they try to land a man (see, for example, the 2009 film *He’s Just Not That Into You*). In short, masculinity and femininity are often narrowly defined (and done so in heterosexual terms). To see this at play take a five-minute break from reading and come up with a list of traits for “masculinity” and those for “femininity.” After you create your list, try to think of examples from pop culture, such as television, film, or advertising, that reinforce the stereotypes you have recorded.

**How do we learn gender?**

Since gender is socially constructed and not innate, we learn gender norms through interactions with people and cultural texts and objects. Socialization is the lifelong process whereby people learn the norms and values of the society they live in. Part of this process is gender socialization. The major agents of socialization—family, peers, education, religion, and media—teach us gender norms and the potential consequences if these norms are challenged. Let’s take the colors pink and blue as a simple example of how gender is socially constructed and learned through the socialization process. We hope it’s fair to assume that most people recognize there is nothing innately meaningful about colors, only the meaning we assign to them (and the history of pink itself is quite interesting as it was originally assigned as a color for males, see *Pink Think: Becoming a Woman in Many Uneasy Lessons* by Lynn Peril, 2002).
Notwithstanding this, if you had a son would you let him wear pink to elementary school? Think about this honestly. If you would not, why? If it’s because you would be afraid he would be teased, why do you think that is and what can we learn from it? In 2011 a viral YouTube video called Riley on Marketing featured a four-year-old girl, Riley Maida, filmed in a toy aisle asking the camera, “Why do all the girls have to buy pink stuff and all the boys have to buy different colored stuff?” By demonstrating how gender is created and reflected by people who are socially constituted, Riley gets to the heart of gender socialization.

On a micro, or smaller scale, to consider gender socialization is to also consider gender identity. Gender identity is how a person views him or herself with respect to masculinity or femininity and how this view of the self leads to the enactment of, or resistance to, socially ascribed gender roles. Gender roles dictate what is considered acceptable for men and women in terms of behavior, career, parenting, style of dress, and so on. As we mentioned earlier with the social construction of gender, we often think boys and girls, and later men and women, simply have “preferences” that are gendered. In other words, we assume women like going shopping more or have a natural preference for romantic comedies. We assume men dislike those activities naturally, and instead prefer sporting events and action movies. Statistics are found to support these beliefs. However, what is vital to understand is that those preferences are themselves the effect of gender socialization over the life course (or a sequence of events that happen over a lifetime.) As Lorber beautifully explains, the term human nature is itself misleading: “The paradox of human nature is that it is always a manifestation of cultural meanings, social relationships, and power politics” (1994/2007, p. 143). Who we become as gendered beings is enmeshed in a social process.

One way to think about gender identity and gender roles is to consider the concept of doing gender, developed by West and Zimmerman (1987) which refers to the ways that people present themselves with respect to masculinity and femininity. As a jumping-off point to talk about doing gender West and Zimmerman cite Harold Garfinkel’s 1967 case study of Agnes, a transsexual who was raised as a boy but became female-identified at the age of 17. Garfinkel chronicled the ways that Agnes adopted in order to pass as a woman. West and Zimmerman called this
a “sex category,” meaning that we categorize the gender of a person based on how they perform their gender. This can be achieved through items of clothing which are deemed “masculine” or “feminine,” the way a person wears their hair or any other distinguishing characteristics that a culture has declared appropriate for men and women. To put it another way, even though a person’s genitalia are hidden from public view, we presume that we can correctly identify their gender based on how they present themselves. Further, if people don’t present gender in prescribed ways, we can mistake them for the wrong sex. For instance, a long-haired man may be assumed to be female from behind.

Judith Butler (1990) applied this research (as well as the work of Simone de Beauvior and Sigmund Freud) to create the concept of gender performativity. For Butler, gender is not something we have, it is something that we do and perform; it is a verb. By performing our gender we are reflecting cultural norms, or various expectations that our culture considers normal for men and women at a specific historical time. Butler takes the field further by explaining that these norms are heteronormative, or that heterosexual orientation is what is deemed normal for a society. For example, have you ever heard a relative say that a single man in your family “just hasn’t found the right girl?” The insinuation is that the man is heterosexual and that dating women is what is normal for him. When we look at our pop culture, examples of heteronormativity abound from television shows which depict heterosexual parents, to pop songs where singers pine over the loss of an opposite sex partner, to children’s books and animated films which portray heterosexual nuclear families (even when depicting animals or made up creatures). But there are also increasingly resistive counter narratives and herein we can see the potential of pop culture to challenge heteronormativity. For instance, one of the reasons the television show Modern Family is so successful is because there are two homosexual characters raising a daughter together and going through all the same trials that heterosexual parents face.

How does feminism relate to gender?

On the television series Parks and Recreation the main character, Leslie Knope, is played by comedienne Amy Poehler. Knope is driven to
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become a leader in government, beginning with her position as Deputy Parks Director in the fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana. A counterpart to Leslie Knope is the character of Liz Lemon, played by Tina Fey on the series 30 Rock. Multiple times throughout the series we see Liz Lemon declaring that, “women can have it all!” as she strives to balance a career and a family. In many ways Leslie Knope and Liz Lemon represent what many would consider to be a new generation of women who have benefited from the work of their mothers and who are striving for professional and personal success (as defined by their culture). Characters like Liz Lemon and Leslie Knope (and the real-life actresses who portray them) exemplify the impact of the waves of feminism. The analogy of a wave is connected to feminism because, like a wave, feminism has ebbs and flows.

The first wave of feminism in the United States dates back to the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and was held, primarily, to discuss the rights of women. One takeaway from the event was the Declaration of Sentiments which is considered to be an introductory document that led to the path of women seeking the right to vote, and many participants at the Seneca Falls Convention became leaders in the women’s suffrage movement. Susan B. Anthony, Elisabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and Fredrick Douglass began a call for women’s rights that was partially answered in 1920 when women received the right to vote via the 19th amendment. The passing of the 19th amendment was depicted in pop culture via the 2004 film Iron Jawed Angels which starred Hillary Swank.

The second wave of feminism refers to the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s and is largely connected to the work of Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan. Steinem was a reporter whose undercover work as a waitress at the Playboy Club exposed the harassment, terrible working conditions, and exploitation of the “Playboy Bunnies.” Her article, titled “I was a Playboy Bunny,” brought her national attention and led to Steinem founding Ms. Magazine, a magazine which is dedicated to national and international news about women and feminism. Betty Friedan was a college-educated housewife. During her time at home she began to feel restless and decided to ask her neighbors about what she called, “the problem that has no name.” The result of those interviews was the 1963 book The Feminine Mystique in which Friedan
combined research in psychology, media, and advertising to address that middle- and upper-class women were expected to find their identity in housework and child-rearing. However, many women were discontent in those limited roles and experienced various levels of dissatisfaction and depression as a result. The work of Steinem and Friedan was foundational for the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when the second wave of feminism is credited with passing laws which protected abused or harassed women, brought sexual liberation in the form of the birth control pill, advanced the number of women seeking public office and/or graduate degrees, and saw the passing of Roe vs. Wade, enabling a woman’s right to reproductive choice.

Just like a wave, feminism hit an ebb in the 1980s. The third wave of feminism was born in the early 1990s as a response to the backlash against feminism, particularly with people who believed that feminism was no longer necessary or that it was created for, and primarily benefited, White women. The lack of representation of women of color and international women in earlier feminist efforts contributed to dispiritedness, particularly with work like *The Feminine Mystique* with which critics argued that the middle-class, White women Freidan interviewed did not represent the experiences of lower-class and/or non-White women who had no choice but to work outside their homes. In 1992 Rebecca Walker wrote an op-ed for *Ms. Magazine* titled, “Becoming the Third Wave” in which she equated the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who was also facing allegations of sexual harassment, to the need for a new movement of feminists. She also pushed for the experiences of women of color to be included in feminist agendas. Walker, along with the 2000 book *Manifesta* written by Amy Richards and Jennifer Baumgardner, is credited with shaping the third wave’s agenda which focuses on the rights of women internationally, the acknowledgement and inclusion of women of color in feminism, and the use of popular culture and technology in feminist activism.

One way the third wave of feminism aims to include and acknowledge the varied experiences of women of color is through the concept of privilege. Privilege speaks to the “unearned privileges” (benefits) a person may be afforded on the basis of their race (or another status characteristic like sexual orientation or social class). Drawing on
the ground-breaking work of Peggy McIntosh (1989), when we say “unearned,” we mean these benefits are not merit based; that privilege is something that was simply given to a person. These privileges only exist within a stratified or unequal society. So, for example, a White person in the United States can turn on any of the major television networks and expect to see people that look like them. In an equal society this would be something everyone could do. People who benefit from unearned privileges often do so unknowingly; their advantage, which is inextricably bound to others’ disadvantage, is unrecognized. That is a part of the privilege, the privilege of not seeing inequality (McIntosh, 1989). McIntosh defines privilege, in part, by writing: “As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage” (1989, p. 9).

Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks have also theorized extensively about privilege. Hill Collins (1990) developed the concept matrix of domination as a part of intersectionality theory which contends that race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and even age all serve as vectors of oppression and privilege. In other words, we don’t just live in a body that is raced, it is also gendered, classed, and so on. Examining the concerns and situations of women of color has led to increased attention to the needs of international women and the development of non-western or critical indigenous feminism. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) addresses the need for third world and western women to work together to advance the rights of women in the global south. Additionally Vandava Shiva, a physicist, has written extensively on the topic of ecofeminism, an approach which connects the domination of women to the desecration of the environment. Ecofeminism argues that Western patriarchal societies have contributed to the oppression of non-Western cultures via their treatment of women and the environment. Shiva explains this connection by giving the examples of farming communities in India which are generally farmed by women. Yet, women do not own the land-rights to the farms in which they labor and they are bound by regulations which have trickled down from Western legislation.

Another example of privilege being challenged in new approaches to feminism is queer theory. Queer theory is an umbrella term for
a range of theories. For our purposes, queer theory links sexual orientation and gender by contending that the categories of sex and gender are not fixed, rather they are fluid and should not be limited to conventional ideas of gender. Moreover, like gender, sexual orientation is socially constructed. Pascoe (2007) explains that queer theory “… moves beyond traditional categories such as male/female, masculine/feminine, and straight/gay to focus instead on the instability of these categories… Queer theory emphasizes multiple identities (p. 11).” Pascoe is contending that queer theory opens up gender categories and takes away gender roles and norms. This means that what is typically considered masculine can be applied to women and what is considered feminine can be applied to men. Perhaps the clearest illustration of queer theory comes from considering transgender individuals. As Nagoshi and Brzuzy point out, “The experiences of transgender individuals, those who do not conform to traditional gender identity binaries, raise compelling questions about the nature of socially defined identities. Does one’s identity in a category, such as gender, require that this identity be fixed in a particular body” (2010, p. 431)?

Transgender theory, according to Nagoshi and Brzuzy, uses gender identity to understand the experiences of transgender and transsexual individuals, particularly the ways that transgender people embody their gender. It contends that being transgender challenges social norms about gender because trans people have lived life in both genders. Transgender people shine a light on the artificiality of the gender binary and can thus become the target of great prejudice.

An excellent example of queer and transgender theory is the character of Sophia, one of the prisoners in the Netflix series Orange is the New Black. Played by transgender actress Laverne Cox, Sophia represents not only what transgender people go through when placed in the prison system, but also the day-to-day challenges they face. For example, there is a scene where Sophia is purchasing shoes for her son and the sales person refers to her as “sir, ma’am, whatever you are.” By directly addressing Sophia’s transgender identity the sales person is illustrating Butler’s point that gender is a social performance. Interestingly, because of our stringent binary, Hollywood seems to think that performing opposite gender expectations is particularly challenging and there is a long history of awarding actors and actresses
who play transgender characters (for example; Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie*, Hilary Swank in *Boys Don’t Cry* and Felicity Huffman in *TransAmerica*).

**How do feminist researchers study gender?**

In order to study gender (as well as a host of other topics), feminist researchers have adapted and developed a wide range of research practices based on theoretical, methodological and activist principles. There is no one way to conduct feminist research and there are a range of theoretical frameworks feminists have adopted, so certainly this brief review can’t cover all of them. We hope it will give you a flavor of some of the ways feminists build knowledge about social life. Theoretical frameworks include different approaches to the research process based on assumptions about what can be known, who can be a knower, and how research should proceed. The major approaches to research include: empiricism, standpoint epistemology, intersectionality theory, postmodern theory, and post-structural theory, but this list is far from exhaustive (for a full discussion of these theoretical perspectives see Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007).

Researchers combine a theoretical framework with research methods in order to develop a methodology, which is a plan for how a particular study will be carried out (Harding, 1993). Research methods are tools for collecting and analyzing data and should be selected in relation to the problem at hand (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2005; 2011). Feminist researchers may use a range of research methods in their work, including quantitative methods such as survey research using a Likert scale where respondents select among standard responses (such as *strongly agree*, *agree* and so on). Statistics can be formulated to show rates of responses. Qualitative methods can also be used, particularly when you are interested in gathering in-depth information from people and you are willing to give up some breadth of data (a large sample) for depth. Qualitative methods include strategies like interviews or observational research and allow you to go further into people’s attitudes, beliefs, and their reporting of their behaviors and explanations.

Suppose you want to study media content itself, as opposed to how it impacts individuals. In this instance you conduct a content analysis
of a sample of media (perhaps looking for themes or perhaps looking for instances in which something occurs). In a situation where your primary goal is to reach a diverse and public audience with your work, challenge stereotypes, and promote reflection, you may opt for an arts-based approach. For example, after conducting a literature review to see trends in media coverage of male and female candidates you could write two short stories, one that follows the media campaign of a male political candidate and one that follows that of a female.

This is just a small sampling of the approaches one could take. As you can see, there are countless methodological possibilities for researchers interested in studying gender and they are each useful in different contexts. It is important to understand how feminist research occurs as you read the essays that follow, which all refer to scholarly work. These essays represent more than “opinions,” they are raising issues that have been well-researched.

We hope that these foundational concepts about gender and feminism are useful as we look more specifically at how popular culture serves as an agent of socialization, circulating social constructions of gender that in turn shape gender identities.

**What is popular culture?**

Popular culture generally refers to the images, narratives, and ideas that circulate within mainstream culture. They are “popular” in that they are known to the masses—most in a given society are exposed to the same dominant aspects of pop culture. Scholar John Storey (2003) traces the history of pop culture noting eight historical moments: folk culture, mass culture, high culture, hegemony, postmodern culture, cultural identities, and global culture. In this day and age there is little distinction between media culture and popular culture. Therefore, popular or media culture is also a part of commercial culture. From a social science perspective, pop culture includes both practices and products. Beginning with the former, there are a range of practices or rituals by which we produce and consume pop culture. There are also the cultural texts themselves, or the products of pop culture (using the word “text” in its broadest sense to include a range of objects, stories, and mediated images).
Media culture is one of the major agents of socialization through which we learn the norms and values of our society. It is not surprising that our socially constructed ideas about gender often originate in, and are reinforced by, dominant narratives in the popular culture. As a socializing force that most are exposed to, popular culture becomes a second skin and is taken for granted. Collectively, we learn a set of beliefs and values through images and narratives that take on the appearance of normality; however, there is nothing natural about media culture, pop culture texts have been constructed. This begs questions like: Who constructs them? Whom do they benefit (financially and/or with respect to power and cultural capital)? Whom do they harm? What ideas do they normalize? Media scholar Sut Jhally (1990; 1997) urges us not to lose sight of the commercial interests driving media culture. He warns that profit-driven media conglomerates monopolize the cultural space, creating and distributing dominant ideologies intended to sell everything from war propaganda to commodities.

As an agent of socialization, media culture differs from family, religion, and other socializing institutions because it of its far-reaching grasp or monopoly of the cultural landscape and also because we often elect to spend our leisure time participating in, generally consuming, pop culture. We are more likely to view it as fun and frivolous, and therefore may fail to interrogate the messages of pop culture and how they are impacting us. Media and gender scholar Jean Kilbourne explains this clearly in the well-known educational (1997) video The Ad and the Ego. She notes that everyone thinks they are personally exempt from the impact of advertising in pop culture and that she often hears, “I don’t pay attention to that” and “It doesn’t impact me.” Kilbourne jokes that she mostly hears these statements from people wearing Budweiser caps, implying they are indeed impacted. Additionally, Jackson Katz (1999, 2013) explores a similar theme in his Tough Guise film series. In this series, Katz addresses the impact pop culture and media have on defining what men see as masculine. Katz’s work is especially relevant when investigating how pop culture impacts our lives because it’s important to understand there may be a disjunction between perception and reality. This is one of the reasons feminist scholars employ a range of research methods in their studies,
some that are better suited to assess attitudes, others behaviors, and others the content of pop culture texts themselves.

**What are the stories, images and ideas about gender that circulate in pop culture?**

There are three main dimensions when trying to understand the relationship between gender and pop culture texts: production, representation, and consumption (Milestone & Meyer, 2012). Posed as questions we can ask:

- Who produces pop culture texts?
- What representations of gender circulate in dominant pop culture?
- What about resistive or counter-dominant representations of gender?
- What is the relationship between gender and the consumption of pop culture texts?

**Who produces pop culture texts?**

In Western culture, popular or media culture dominates the cultural landscape. There is hardly anywhere to look where you won’t see the impact of media, whether it is advertisements on the side of buses, billboards down the highway, magazines at the grocery store checkout, or CDs for sale at the counter of Starbucks. Bear in mind these examples say nothing of the pop culture we choose to consume—television, movies, social media, concerts, sporting events and so on. Because pop culture dominates the cultural space, the creators behind the scenes are cultural architects, building our environment. Arguably the role of the makers of pop culture is as great in society as the role of architects who design homes, buildings, and public spaces. The creation of popular culture becomes the fabric of society—who we are as people and who we think we can become, including powerful ideas about gender.

When we look at who produces pop culture the gender disparity is overwhelming. In the 2011 film, *Miss Representation*, the filmmaker presents some shocking statistics about the roles of women in entertainment.
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• Women are 17% of all executive producers
• Women are 13% of all film writers
• Women are 7% of all film producers
• Women are 2% of all cinematographers
• Women are the authors of 20% of all op-eds in American newspapers
• Women are 3% of all creative directors in advertising
• Women hold 3% of all clout positions in media

This list could go on and on. Media culture is overwhelmingly produced by men.

There is also a lesson here to be learned about the “unearned privileges” we mentioned earlier. When we think about gender inequality we often think “girls and women” and therefore focus on the disadvantages to girls and women (Katz, 1999). However, disadvantage is only one side of the coin. There is also the side of privilege and unearned benefits. Let’s look at the other, often invisible side of these statistics.

• In 2011 men are 83% of all executive producers
• In 2011 men are 87% of all film writers
• In 2011 men are 93% of all film producers
• In 2011 men are 98% of all cinematographers
• In 2011 men are the authors of 80% of all op-eds in American newspapers
• In 2011 men are 97% of all creative directors in advertising
• In 2011 men hold 97% of all clout positions in media

What representations of gender circulate in dominant pop culture? What about resistive or counter-dominant representations of gender?

Given that males are the primary writers of popular culture, and that this is a commercial industry unlikely to challenge the status quo for economic reasons, it is not surprising that we often see stereotyped portrayals of femininity and masculinity. To consider this issue, let’s turn to a parody written by Martha Lauzen titled If Women Ran Hollywood... 2012. After recounting the stark gender imbalance in Hollywood as evidenced by gender inequity behind the scenes...
and on-screen, Lauzen muses about what would happen if women ran Hollywood instead of men and lists 14 “what ifs.” Here are a couple examples from her list (you can read Lauzen’s entire list at http://www.womensmediacenter.com/feature/entry/if-women-ran-hollywood---2012):

- “Cable television networks targeting a male audience with moniker’s such as Men’s Entertainment (or ME) would traffic in the most heavily prescribed social roles imaginable, encouraging men to stay in their proper place.”
- “The Real Husbands of (fill-in-the-blank) would be a successful reality show franchise for Bravo featuring males in manufactured situations and reinforcing the worst possible stereotypes.”

The point is clear: sexism in the production of popular culture leads to sexist representations within popular culture. Put more gently, having fewer perspectives behind the scenes will lead to a more limited pool of representations and less diversity in storytelling style and content.

The contributors throughout this volume examine representations of femininity and masculinity within particular genres of popular culture. As context for those discussions, here are some general statistics from 2011 that highlight persistent gender inequity:

- Male characters were more likely to be shown at their job than female characters, 41% to 28% (http://www.missrepresentation.org/about-us/resources/gender-resources)
- Men on television were more likely to talk about work than women, 52% to 40% (http://www.missrepresentation.org/about-us/resources/gender-resources)
- Women on television were more likely to talk about relationships than men, 63% to 49% (http://www.missrepresentation.org/about-us/resources/gender-resources)
- Males outnumber females in family films three to one (a statistic that has held steady since 1946) (http://www.missrepresentation.org/about-us/resources/gender-resources)
- Only 16% of protagonists in film were female (making 84% male) (http://reelgirl.com/2011/10/stats-from-miss-representation/)
These trends hold true across media, even the news:

- Women and girls are the subject of less than 20% of all news stories (http://reelgirl.com/2011/10/stats-from-miss-representation/)
- Women make up 14% of the guests on influential Sunday television talk shows and only 7% of repeat guests (http://reelgirl.com/category/statistics/)
- In 2010 *The New York Review of Books* had a six to one ratio of male to female bylines. There was also glaring gender imbalance in *The New Republic* and *The Atlantic* (http://reelgirl.com/category/statistics/)
- In 2010 *The New Yorker* reviewed 36 books by men and nine by women. There was also stark gender imbalance in book reviews in *Harper’s* and *The New York Times Book Review* (http://reelgirl.com/category/statistics/)

What we see from these statistics is that who produces popular culture impacts who is represented and in what manner. In the preceding lists we can see implications for gender roles and gender identity, power and world-making activities, and professional development and influence over others.

It is important to remember that narrow and binary constructions of gender are harmful to everyone in society. The media consistently define masculinity in narrow and heterosexist ways making it difficult for many real boys and men to exhibit characteristics associated with femininity or embody roles commonly identified as female, such as that of nurturer. Males who exhibit these important human qualities may be bullied and called “sissy” among other terms. These dualistic constructions are so engrained in the culture that they affect both males and females. For example, on a recent episode of *Project Runway*, one female contestant critiqued another for being too emotional. She said her competitor should “take it like a man.”

Despite the dominant narratives about gender, popular culture is not homogenized and increasingly we see resistive or counter representations. For example, some of the contributors in this book discuss how television shows like *Modern Family* are offering alternative representations of gender and family, and advertising campaigns like “Real Beauty” by Dove are expanding representations
of femininity. There are individuals posing challenges too. For example, in 2012 musician Frank Ocean posted an open letter on Tumblr explaining that he had been in a relationship with a man who was the first person he ever truly loved. Ocean’s blog went viral and was commented on widely by supporters such as Russell Simmons, Beyoncé, and Jay-Z as well as those making homophobic public outbursts, like Chris Brown.

What is the relationship between gender and the consumption of pop culture texts?

While media images are so ubiquitous there are many we are all exposed to simply by going to the grocery store, we also engage in a selection process. Our gender identity may impact what pop culture texts we choose to consume. For example, many college students place ads and clippings from magazines on their dorm walls. How do they select what images to display?

There are also the issues of internalization and effects of media representations. Beginning with the former, not everyone will internalize the messages of popular culture in the same ways. For example, two college-age women may avidly read women’s fashion magazines and consume other hyper-feminine media content and their psyches won’t necessarily be impacted in the same way. One woman may develop a poor body image, low self-esteem, and may engage in any number of behaviors as a result, from cosmetic surgery to developing an eating disorder or disordered eating. The other woman may be less deeply impacted; however, there is no telling the extent to which that media still shapes her beauty or relationships ideals. Although we don’t all internalize gender constructions the same way, we all live in a society in which there are widespread effects of media representations. Here are a few examples:

- Girls’ self-esteem decreases in adolescence as compared with their male counterparts and this can lead to lowered ambition (Miss Representation)
- The routine objectification of women’s bodies has led to what the American Psychological Association (APA) has deemed a

- The APA, CDC, and National Institutes of Health (NIH) show a clear link between media violence and real-world violence, which is gendered (Miss Representation)
- Some women experience “role strain” or “role conflict” as they struggle to “do it all” as media has prescribed (Miss Representation)
- In the United States, 20 million women and 10 million men suffer from a clinically significant eating disorder at some time in their life (http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/get-facts-eating-disorders)

While we are not all impacted equally by the pop culture environment, and can exercise some agency in what media we consume, there is no doubt that the personal and social effects of media culture are far reaching.

**Organization of the book**

The pages that follow offer a range of contributions on the major genres of pop culture. We have invited authors with different backgrounds and writing styles to share their expertise. We hope the readings not only provide information and frameworks for understanding gender and pop culture more critically, but also stimulate lively discussion, debate, and personal and social reflection.

Before beginning the readings that will you take you through *Gender and Pop Culture: A Text-Reader*, we offer this summary of each chapter. Please note, the chapters need not be read in sequence. Following this introduction to the text is Chapter 2 “Blurred Lines of a Different Kind: Sexism, Sex, Media and Kids,” Scott Richardson’s exploration of the impact of media on children. Through re-creations of dialogue with his students and children, Richardson addresses how the most well-known images and music in pop culture continue to provide children with gender roles steeped in patriarchal traditions. Richardson uses the Disney princesses and the 2013 song “Blurred Lines” by Robin Thicke as two of many examples which demonstrate the messages of sex and sexuality children receive.
Chapter 3 is Patricia Arend’s fascinating review of the impact of advertising on gender. Arend draws from advertising media such as Danica Patrick’s GoDaddy.com sexy ad campaign, the ways masculinity is depicted in commercials for pick-up trucks, and the links to violence against women in Dolce and Gabanna’s images. Through a conversation of advertising’s use of gender roles as a framework for masculinity and femininity, Arend applies concepts, like doing gender, and theorists, like Erving Goffman, to contemporary advertising campaigns.

Themes of patriarchy, music, and activism can be found in Chapter 4, “From Lady Gaga to Consciousness Rap: The Impact of Music on Gender and Social Activism.” Adrienne Trier-Bieniek and Amanda Pullum analyze songs by Beyoncé, Lupe Fiasco, and Ani DiFranco in order to demonstrate the ways music has become a tool for feminist consciousness-raising. Counter to Thicke’s “Blurred Lines, the artists covered in this chapter seemingly want to create music that will challenge patriarchal standards while also being aesthetically pleasing to listen to.

Chapter 5, “As Seen on TV: Gender, Television, and Popular Culture” bridges the history of television’s depiction of gender via shows like I Love Lucy or Maude with contemporary reality television such as The Real Housewives franchise and The Jersey Shore. Jenn Moore incorporates recent television situation comedies like Two and a Half Men and The Big Bang Theory as examples of how television assigns gender roles to characters, perhaps sometimes without questioning the impact of their caricature of what it means to be male or female. This is a theme which carries into Chapter 6 “Popular Movies that Teach: How Movies Teach about Schools & Genders.” In this chapter, Adam Greteman and Kevin Burke also draw from historical-to-contemporary examples of how gender has been portrayed in film, but they do so through looking at how the education system is presented in the movie. By looking at films like Grease, Hairspray, Dangerous Minds, and High School Musical, Greteman and Burke direct our attention to the ways gender “goes to school” by combining a history of film with gender stereotypes and pop culture’s fascination with youth.

With Chapter 7, “Gender, Sport and Popular Culture,” Emily A. Roper and Katherine M. Polasek, combine a discussion of women’s history in sports with a sociological interpretation of how gender is
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connected to and constructed by sports. Roper and Polasek make the compelling argument that while sports do tend to further engender ideas about femininity, they also trap men into strict ideas about what masculinity is and how they should perform as men. Finally, in Chapter 8 “Gender and Technology: Women’s Usage, Creation and Perspectives” Cindy Royal addresses the relationship between women and technology. Even though women have been the primary users of the telephone and the first computer programmer was a woman, technology has always been a male-dominated field. Royal chronicles this gender disparity and the impact on women in tech-related fields.

In the final chapter, “Using the Lessons Outside of the Classroom: In Other Words, Now What?” we suggest several ways that students can apply what they have learned in this book to their own lives and the communities in which they live. Following the concluding chapter we provide additional resources, such as suggested readings for each of the topics covered in this book as well as topics beyond the scope of the book, such as international studies in popular culture. We hope this text provides a strong base to interrogate gender and popular culture, and that you have some fun along the way.

Pedagogical Resources

Questions for Class Discussion

1. How do you present your gender? Have you ever been mistaken for the opposite gender?
2. Which form of media do you use most consistently? What would happen if you stopped using it?
3. Consider and discuss the statistics of women’s participation in the entertainment industry. Why do you think women are largely invisible?
4. Discuss the waves of feminism and create an outline for what you think the fourth wave of feminism should look like. What role will media and pop culture play in its foundation? What issues do you think should be front and center?
Class Activity

Bring one or two pieces of pop culture to class. This can be anything from a magazine, newspaper, laptop or tablet. Perform a content analysis on the media by finding common themes related to gender and talking about them. For example, if you use your laptop you could go to a page like Twitter or Facebook and analyze the ads which pop up on the page. You can also count the times a certain kind of image or text appears. For instance, if you are content analyzing a newspaper for coverage of male and female political candidates, how many times are issues like family or clothing mentioned?

Class Activity with Supplemental Reading

Have students read the novel research-informed Low-Fat Love by Patricia Leavy. They should highlight all of the pop culture references while reading. Break students into small groups (3-5 students) and ask them to explore the following issue: Low-Fat Love can be used to explore the social construction of femininity and masculinity. Have a discussion about how the characters in the book illustrate some of the ways we construct and perform gender identities. What is the role of pop culture in how the characters construct their identities? The class can reconvene and students can share some of their ideas which you can write on the board (creating two columns for femininity and masculinity).

Problem-Based Learning Exercise

Problem-based learning assumes that students learn together by doing—by engaging in research and problem-solving. The following PBL is divided into four parts which can be spaced out over a few weeks or over the entire semester. Randomly divide students in groups of 3-5. To begin. Each group should talk about their goals for group work and then pick an area of popular culture they you are interested in learning more about this week and then select a genre within that area. Examples includes: film (some example genres are: romantic comedies, westerns, horror, children/animation, foreign, action-adventure); magazines (women’s fashion, men’s, fitness); television (sitcoms, dramas, children’s
shows/cartoons, tween shows, game shows, talk shows); fiction (novels, comics, graphic novels, children’s books); etc. Students will be studying the genre they select all week so groups should spend some time deciding what everyone is interested in learning about.

PBL 1
Learn some general scholarly information about your topic—what kind of social research has been done on your topic and how do sociologists frame your topic (how do they talk about it)? Bring a sample of articles to class tomorrow and be prepared to briefly talk about your answer to this question.

PBL 2
What are the dominant ideas about masculinity and femininity put forth in the genre of pop culture you selected? How are “maleness” and “femaleness” predominantly presented/defined within this genre? Look for some research to address this question (you may also come up with some examples to illustrate your points).

PBL 3
One of the ways to combat the gender stereotyping children and young adults learn through the socialization process is through “media literacy” education. Arguably in our media saturated society this kind of learning can be viewed as vital for overall (psychological) health and well-being (just like health education is). Find scholarly literature that explains what media literacy education is and then think about how it can be constructed in relation to your genre.

PBL 4
Take what you have learned this week and put together a 15-20 minute presentation for the class on your topic. To take it to another level, as a part of your presentation create an arts-based piece (for example a short story, a series of poems, a script, etc.) that enhances your presentation. Please write up a one-page artist-researcher statement that you will hand in.
Additional Sources for Class Activities

The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (www.seejane.org)
Media Education Foundation (www.mediaed.org)
Women’s Media Center (www.womensmediacenter.com)

References


