

PART I

A CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH TO GENDER, RACE, AND CLASS IN MEDIA

In this book, we offer a selection of critical discussions of mass media entertainment culture.¹ These discussions exemplify a powerful method of analysis that you will be able to apply on your own to other examples. In this way, we hope to promote and support media literacy.

We have divided our introductory section into two separate but connected areas, Media Theory and Gender, Race, and Class. We begin with media theory because we think students will find it useful to have a good grasp of several central concepts, introduced here, before going on to tackle later readings in which an understanding of these concepts is presumed. In the Media Theory section, we highlight especially the central concepts and terms of the field of *cultural studies* as applied to mass media: *political economy* (including global transformations in media production in relation to changing technology), *ideology*, *hegemony*, *textual analysis*,

and *audience reception*. As in all the other sections in this book, there are many ways in which the collected chapters in this Part I introduction are in dialogue with one another. In these opening comments, we give only one possible reading of the ways in which their main themes connect.

◆ *Media Theory*

We open our Media Theory section with “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture,” by Douglas Kellner (Chapter 1). This sets out the three-part approach to cultural studies (political economy/production, textual analysis, and audience reception) that informs this book. With Kellner, we believe that to understand fully a media product such as a TV show or advertising image or romance novel, one ideally needs to be able to understand the socioeconomic context in which it is created (political economy/production), analyze its constructed meaning(s) through careful attention to its particular visual/verbal/auditory languages or “codes” (textual analysis), and determine through ethnographic research what its real-world audiences contribute to the meaning-making process (audience reception). In addition, Kellner points to the importance of better integrating considerations of gender, race, and class as categories of social analysis in cultural studies work in the future.

We begin with political economy because above all, commercial entertainment is profit-oriented business, largely controlled by giant corporations. When talking about political economy, we need to foreground some crucial recent changes in global media industries, including, according to David Croteau and William Hoynes in “The New Media Giants” (Chapter 2)

1. *Growth*. Mergers and buyouts have made media corporations bigger than ever.

2. *Integration*. The new media giants have integrated either horizontally by moving into multiple forms of media, such as film, publishing, radio, and so on, or vertically by owning different stages or production and distribution, or both.

3. *Globalization*. To varying degrees, the major media conglomerates have become global entities, marketing their wares worldwide.

4. *Concentration of ownership*. As major players acquire more media holdings, the ownership of mainstream media has become increasingly concentrated.

These authors explore how developments in the wider economy in the industrialized West in recent years have affected the media industry (and vice versa). A similar point was made by George Lipsitz when looking at an earlier period, immediately after World War II through the 1950s. In “The Meaning of Memory” (Chapter 3), Lipsitz shows how the needs of the postwar U.S. economy facilitated the development of mass television production. He explores how the increase in the sale of televisions and the development of a group of situation comedies (sitcoms) were used to transform a traditional, ethnic immigrant ideology, which stressed values of community, thrift, and commitment to labor unions, into an American Dream ideology, which stressed individualism, consumerism, and suburban domesticity—values consistent with the needs of the expanding postwar capitalist economy.

Capitalist economies by definition require an ever-increasing level of consumption of goods and services, and new media technologies play a crucial role both in increasing overall consumption of media products and in changing the conditions under which consumption takes place—often helping to “domesticate” the entertainment, as in Lipsitz’s example of TV sitcoms. More recently, as videotape and the VCR brought the movies into the

consumer's living room, this new technology played a role in the "mainstreaming" of the formerly outlaw entertainment industry *pornography*, and this process continues today as consumer appetite for pornography has helped fuel the early growth of the Internet. At the same time, as Frank Rich argues in "Naked Capitalists" (Chapter 4), through diversification of their entertainment holdings, major companies such as Marriott Hotels are now among the purveyors of X-rated movies.

What does the rapid expansion of media technologies and products mean at a political and cultural level? One way of understanding this is provided by the neo-Marxist theory of hegemony developed by theorists such as Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and Stuart Hall, who have been highly influential in contemporary media studies. Drawing on the thought of these theorists, James Lull defines *hegemony* as "the power or dominance that one social group holds over others" (Chapter 5). As Lull points out,

Owners and managers of media industries can produce and reproduce the content, inflections, and tones of ideas favorable to them far more easily than other social groups because they manage key socializing institutions, thereby guaranteeing that their points of view are constantly and attractively cast into the public arena.

As Douglas Kellner argues, however, even though dominant ideas held by economic and social elites are "encoded" within media texts such as sitcoms or advertisements, we cannot simply assume we know how consumers of media texts actually *decode* (construct meaning from) a given text. For that piece of the equation, we must turn to audience reception studies, such as Janice Radway's and Robin Coleman's.

Consumers of the media should not be conceptualized as mere passive pawns of

media imagery controlled by the dominant culture, according to the influential concept of oppositional readings, first proposed by Stuart Hall (also discussed by Kellner in Chapter 1). The meaning of media texts cannot simply be established by one critic's decoding of the text—no matter how subtle and full—because all texts are to some degree "open" (*polysemic*, or capable of multiple meanings). Therefore, we must also seek to know how different audiences (often subcultural communities), bringing different experiences and identities to the process of reading/viewing, actually understand these texts. Specific audiences can either accept those meanings that are *preferred* by the text or produce *negotiated* or even *oppositional readings* of their own.

Janice Radway's *ethnographic* research into the audience reception of romance novels, in "Women Read the Romance" (Chapter 6), begins to add this dimension, bringing forward women's own interpretations of the role or romance reading in their lives as wives and mothers. Radway shows how one specific group of white lower-income women negotiate with the genre, both in terms of the books they select and in terms of the ways they actually read the text and appropriate its meanings. Radway acknowledges that "romance reading . . . can function as a kind of training for the all-too-common task of reinterpreting a spouse's unsettling actions as the signs of passion, devotion, and love." Yet she sees in their selection of certain books as favorites, and rejection of others, their active tendency to critique certain patriarchal masculine behaviors, substituting an ideal of the "nurturing" male that may be missing in their own family lives. Through the act of reading itself, this group of women romance readers escaped temporarily from familial demands on their time, and Radway interprets this action as potential resistance to the patriarchal restrictions of their lives. While encouraging respect for women's own experiences as cultural consumers, however, Radway warns against

confusing modes of resistance that reside in textual consumption with a more real-world resistance, which might take the form of organized protest against the patriarchal abuses women meet in real life.

A more recent example of audience reception research is Coleman's study of how black audiences actually respond to black sitcoms (Chapter 7). She highlights the range of different responses, alerting us to the complexity of how audiences actually make meaning. This study reveals how the diversity and multiplicity of experience and identity within the African American community produces divergent readings of media texts. Although it might have been predicted that black viewers would "shun the characterizations, seeing absolutely no congruence between these funny men and women and their own self-image," Coleman found the actual range of reactions to be more complex. In her sample of participants, women viewers in particular were able to identify "some compatibility between the lived experiences of African Americans and that which is represented on television."

Some media theorists have begun to warn (as Kellner does) of the dangers of overemphasizing the power of media audiences to resist the ideologies encoded in dominant media texts. We would agree that audience resistance alone cannot serve as a counterbalance, nor substitute for political efforts, both to get mainstream producers to change imagery and ultimately to achieve a more democratic system of media ownership and access. But as long-term battles are being waged on the political fronts, we would also advocate taking a view of ourselves as media audiences, which is grounded in respect for our own *agency*, values, and intelligence.

◆ *Gender, Race, and Class*

The articles in this section apply many of the theoretical concepts isolated above to the

analysis of gender, race, and class in media production, text construction, and consumption. Some media scholars tend to focus almost exclusively on theory, relegating social and political concerns to the background. However, over the years there has been a shift toward an approach that insists on the need to develop theory within an understanding of how media texts may either contribute to or undermine the inequalities that exist in postindustrialized societies like our own. The linkage of media theory and politics is particularly true within cultural studies, which is concerned with the lived experience of socially subordinate groups, and the ways in which media industries contribute to the continuation of inequalities.

Central to the project of cultural studies as it relates to analysis of gender, race, and class representations, therefore, is the concept of ideology, defined briefly in Stuart Hall's chapter, "The Whites of Their Eyes" (Chapter 8), as "those images, concepts and premises . . . through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence." For critical media theorists, the study of ideology is intimately connected to the study of media texts, because these play a major role in producing and reproducing ideologies.

What do we mean when we say that we view gender (and sexuality), race, and class as "social constructs"? To take this approach means to reduce the explanatory role of biology or "nature" in our social arrangements and to shift our attention to the social, economic, and political forces that shape and reshape these conceptual categories over time and place. Many examples can be offered of the "instability" or artificial and shifting nature of these concepts, even from recent U.S. history.

One of the major accomplishments of late-20th-century feminism(s) has been the widespread recognition that women are "not born but made"—that the process of taking on "feminine" gender attributes begins at birth and requires intensive socialization—and that a given culture's idea of

the “perfect woman” (its gender norms) can shift dramatically in response to changing economic and social conditions. (The “Rosie the Riveter” propaganda campaign during World War II, succeeded by the “just a housewife” propaganda of the postwar period and the 1950s, is one well-known example.) Even what seems the most biologically fixed of the three categories, then, gender, has had to be reconceptualized, first by *feminists* and more recently by *queer theorists*, as both unstable and multidimensional (rather than fixed by nature and binary).

Queer theory, which grew out of activist politics and *postmodern* scholarship, questions the traditional ideas of “normal” and “deviant” in the realms of gender and sexuality. Historians of sexuality have pointed out that even the words for the concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality are only about a century old, and are the products of a “medicalized” *discourse*—a discussion produced by the new professional health fields of psychology and sexology, beginning at the end of the 19th century (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1988; Katz, 1996). Making use of this and many other new insights produced in gay and lesbian studies, queer theory argues against the taken-for-granted notion that there are only two genders, corresponding to biological maleness and biological femaleness. In queer theory, both gender and sexuality (desire) are ambiguous, shifting, unstable, and too complex to fit neatly into an either/or (binary) model. Some theorists propose locating both gender and sexuality on a continuum, like that used by the early sexologist Alfred Kinsey, to distinguish different degrees of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” (Schwartz & Rutter, 1998). The influential theorist Judith Butler (1999) has likened gender to a theatrical performance—a matter of role-playing, with no necessary correlation to one’s biological sex. Drag, cross-dressing, and other types of transgender activities, behavior, and identities in 21st-century urban culture illustrate how limited, and often useless, are

attempts to maintain the traditionally *binary* categories masculine/feminine, gay/straight, and even male/female (Nanda, 2000; Schwartz & Rutter, 1998).

Queer theory has thus given us a new, certainly unsettling but also exciting and potentially liberating way of thinking about gender representations in popular culture (Doty, 1993). For example, from a queer theory perspective, the Barbie doll, which we usually think of as such a hyper-heterosexual feminine icon, can quite easily be read as a drag queen, as Mary Rogers does in “Hetero Barbie?” (Chapter 9). In “Popular Culture and Queer Representation” (Chapter 10), Diane Raymond offers an introductory discussion of queer theory, as well as an analysis of the limits placed on queer representation of gays and lesbians in recent TV fiction.

Hall’s classic essay “The Whites of Their Eyes” (Chapter 8) brings Western *race ideologies* to the foreground by examining the role of media in constructing the meaning of “blackness.” *Critical race theory* in recent years has aimed to reveal the social nature of our racial ideas—in particular by focusing on how the idea of “whiteness” evolved and functioned in the context of European and American political history. For example, in “White Negroes” (Chapter 11), Jan Pieterse reminds us that the 19th-century Irish were conceptualized as “black” by the Anglo-American elite and that the first Chinese immigrants to America were also stereotyped according to a conceptual template already worked out for African Americans. Although not denying the different histories of different peoples classified as “nonwhite,” he emphasizes the similarities of their representation as inferior through dominant (white supremacist) racial ideology.

When it comes to our ideas about social *class*, we are similarly likely to presume a “natural” basis for media representations that clearly help preserve the status quo. As Richard Butsch shows in a study on television representations of the male working-class buffoon (Part VI), viewers are offered

the idea that people in the “lower class” (working low-income people) are not succeeding in becoming rich because they are laughably stupid, rather than because they confront an economic and educational structure that limits class mobility. Butsch (1992) also alerts us to the possibility that “class is symbolically coded in gender terms” when working-class males are devalued in television sitcoms through being characterized with stereotypically “feminine” attributes.

As the last example suggests, cultural critics have begun to agree that gender, race, and class are most usefully understood not as discrete categories but as intertwined in complex ways. In the early days of feminist media discussions, gender analysis did not sufficiently acknowledge race and class differences among women, and it tended to generalize from the experiences of white middle- and upper-class women—other “femininities” and most “masculinities” were frequently missing from the discussion. Thankfully, media studies as a field now has a more sophisticated understanding of the interrelationships among gender, race, and class. Many of the readings in this book will acknowledge these interrelationships, discussing the way gender is “inflected by” (influenced by) race, or class by gender. In this introductory section, we include two chapters that demonstrate the ways in which gender analysis can usefully be informed by particularities of class and race.

In “Inventing the Cosmo Girl” (Chapter 12), Laurie Ouellette shows how Helen Gurley Brown, author of the best-selling *Sex and the Single Girl*, and later the editor who made *Cosmopolitan* magazine such a major success in the 1960s and 1970s, took on the cultural mission of showing working-class white women the path to upward mobility. For these white working-class women in the prefeminist 1960s, learning to fake a middle-class version of femininity was the key to real class mobility, through ensnaring a well-off man.

Even a half century later, we note, many media texts, including sitcoms, continue to reproduce this gender/class ideology. Kristal Brent Zook’s “*Living Single* and the ‘Fight for Mr. Right’” (Chapter 13) argues that the “desperation theme”—“the premise that the world is teeming with black women who’ll do just about anything to land a single, and preferably rich, man”—is one of several “contradictory ideological forces at work in *Living Single*.” Side by side with the socially conservative desperation theme, Zook identifies a highly contrasting “radical womanism” theme, embodied in “the fictional, presentational, and documentary personas of Queen Latifah.”

Living Single was created by Yvette Lee Bowser, “the first African American woman to create a successful prime-time series for network television,” and herself a believer in a “moderate feminism,” according to Zook. This ambiguous television text is a good example of the dilemmas creatively encountered by artists from nonelite backgrounds who work within media production industries still controlled by elite interests and attempt to create in these contexts “authentic” representations of the experiences of racial and sexual minorities, women, and the working poor. Imani Perry offers yet another case study, that of contemporary women hip-hop artists, in her chapter, “Who(se) Am I? The Identity and Image of Women in Hip-Hop” (Chapter 14).

Cyberspace (Internet-facilitated communication) appears to offer a new arena where nonelites can exercise some control over cultural representations of gender, race, and class. Chris Berry and Fran Martin’s “Queer ’n’Asian on—and off—the Net” (Chapter 15) reports on an ethnographic study of Internet use by nonnormative sexual communities in two Asian locations. The authors explore the impact of the Internet on community building, and they argue that “the net is neither a substitute for nor an escape from real life, . . . and in the emergent queer cultures of Taiwan

and South Korea, it is a particularly substantial and dynamic component.”

The issues related to gender, sexuality, race, and class ideology in media culture that have been highlighted here in the Part I introduction will be important to bear in mind throughout subsequent chapters, where a wide array of media cultural forms are examined in more depth.

◆ Note

1. For many people, the term *media* makes them think immediately of the (TV) news. We do not include analysis of journalism or the news industries in this book. We are very much aware of the impact of the news industries on our cultural, political, and social lives, but we have chosen to focus this volume on media products that do not claim to play a serious role in informing or educating the public. Even in this area of pop culture mass entertainment we do not aim to be comprehensive. We do not attempt to represent film studies, for example, and we only nod at such areas as commercial pop music, sports entertainment media, and many others. Many other books amply cover areas we have had to omit.

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