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Women in/as Entertainment

The ways in which women are routinely portrayed in mass media have been the focus of much feminist media scholarship over the past 30 years. Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, and James Benet's (1978) foundational collection of empirical and theoretical articles in *Hearth and Home* was among the earliest to problematize women's media representations. The text cited not only women's routine omission – or symbolic annihilation – from mass media, but also the ways in which women were stereotyped. While Tuchman et al. focused mainly on the women-and-media problems in North America, its themes were by no means geographically unique. Mieke Ceulemans and Guido Fauconnier's (1979) UNESCO-funded cross-cultural study located women's representations within several sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Like Tuchman et al.'s work, they found that advertising, television, films, news, and other genres in Western nations, as well as those in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, disproportionately emphasized women's traditional domestic roles or treated them as sex objects. Similarly, Margaret Gallagher's (1979) UNESCO-funded study emphasized the underlying reason why women's image would continue to concern women for decades to come: "The ... media are potentially powerful agents of socialization and social change – presenting models, conferring status, suggesting appropriate behaviors, encouraging stereotypes" (p. 3).

Media representations thus became a major front for both popular and academic feminist struggle, continuing up to the present time with contemporary concerns such as bride sites on the Internet and pornography downloads via cell phones. In fact, feminists could argue that the media's influence is even greater now than before, with 24/7 news channels, hundreds of satellite and digital services offering everything from natural history to hard-core pornography, and picture messaging via mobile phones. And popular media such as film, television, newspapers, and magazines continue to frame (in every sense of the word) women within a narrow repertoire of types that bear little or no relation to how real women live their real lives. However, the situation is not entirely gloomy and as feminist campaigns have demanded media reform over the representations of women, and as women and men with feminist consciences have made their way into media professions, there have been important changes almost everywhere in the world. What is important to emphasize at the outset of this discussion, then, is the dialectical nature of the process – progress inevitably occurs alongside recalcitrance, and backlash is a predictable part of these events.

In this chapter, then, we consider women's representation in entertainment and fiction-based media, predominantly film and television, and we take a genre approach that includes crime, soaps, and fantasy narratives as vehicles through which to signal the primary concerns of feminist media scholars. As women's status and social practices have shifted through women's movements worldwide, these have (and often have not) been reflected in changing patterns of gendered representation. This is an extremely broad field and our intention here is not to be exhaustive in our overview – which is, in any case, impossible – but, rather, to illustrate some of the key trends that have been exposed by feminist media scholars' interrogatations of popular media praxis over the past few decades. A significant amount of the work on representation has been done within a feminist cultural studies framework, focusing specifically on commercially made films, and foregrounding considerations of ways in which audiences negotiate meanings in texts.

The Early Days

Many of the early feminist analyses of mediated representations of women in fictional genres were focused on the medium of film. For Maggie Humm

(1997), the power of the feminist project was precisely its ability to demonstrate the ways in which the category "woman" was politically constructed and routinely oppressed. In an interesting analysis of four films spanning the 1930s to the 1970s – *Camille* (1936), *Blonde Venus* (1932), *Lady from Shanghai* (1946), and *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977) – E. Ann Kaplan (1983) sets out to reveal the ways in which the male gaze operates from the vantage point of power and renders women silent and marginal. One of the crucial ways in which women's lives were implicitly regulated in cinematic portrayals was through the very device of appealing to them as women spectators via the invention of the "woman's film." This was, arguably, a marketing ploy established in the US studio era of the 1930s and 1940s as a way of targeting a niche (female) audience that had hitherto failed to be attracted to the cinema in large numbers, with the release of films such as *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) and *The Reckless Moment* (1949).

Given the era in which they were made, these films contained an inherent contradiction, offering women the spectacle of a lifestyle outside the conventions of respectable femininity, but at the same time making clear the errors of that particular way (Basinger 1994). This temptation, though, is merely illusion, since the film industry at that time, and for at least two decades beyond, was circumscribed by a set of guidelines (the Production Code) that attempted to maintain standards of sexual and moral probity, although by the end of the 1960s both the Production Code and this kind of "woman's film" had all but disappeared (Neale 2000). Molly Haskell (1973) suggests that the genre was framed within an avowedly conservative aesthetic that encouraged the (woman) spectator to accept rather than reject her lot, whilst taking on a pitying stance toward the tragic heroine. Interestingly, the use of cinema as a tool of moral conscription was not a uniquely American phenomenon and, as Lant (1991) suggests, British wartime films trod a careful line between valorizing women's contribution to the war effort but also reassuring men of their continued femininity. Regulation of moral conduct through cinematic representations of women and women's role was also widely used in Spain during the same period. In her discussion of Spanish director Josefina Molina's success in subverting gender stereotypes in films such as *Función de Noche* (*Evening Performance*, 1981), María Suárez Lafuente (2003: 395) suggests that:

> Women's psyche had suffered the devastating effects of 40 years of a film industry dedicated to epic and local-color films, where women were the embodiment of discipline and self-sacrifice to the glory of God and country,

or else cheap comedies where the female body was a mere sexual object for the male gaze. Spanish cinema was part of the state apparatus to keep men entertained and under control, and to provide women with the correct and incorrect models of national femininity. It is no exaggeration to say that during the 1950s and the 1960s women were educated in the official social morals and manners primarily through their Sunday visit to the cinema.

The Eyes of Laura Mulvey

Early explorations of the highly gendered nature of looking relations – the gaze – between the audience and the text are largely credited to Laura Mulvey, writing in the 1970s, and contemporary feminist media research and theorizing about media artifacts owes a rather large debt to her foundational work, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, published in 1975. In that essay, written 30 years ago, she theorized the relationship between the production of a film (i.e., its basic techniques, structure, and principal mode of address), the audience (spectator), and viewing pleasure. Mulvey's legacy in terms of her impact on the field and her enduring influence on contemporary work is her insistence that film is deliberately structured to produce a male gaze that makes voyeurs of us all, and it is this masculinized gaze that "is the main mechanism of filmic control" (Humm 1997: 14). For Mulvey, herself heavily influenced by psychoanalytic theory, the gaze is inherently eroticized (in Lacanian terms, "scopophilic"), since the principal players, in the form of the camera*man*, the audience, and the hero, are assumed to be male, and the principal object in the form of the film's co-star/love interest is assumed to be female.

What Mulvey did in that essay, for the very first time, was to argue that film was inexplicably bound up with sex, that men "do" and women "receive," thus perpetuating existing gendered relations. While Mulvey went on to refine her early ideas, it was that initial critique of film *per se* that was so bold and controversial, which signaled a fundamental shift in the ways in which spectatorship would thereafter be researched, discussed, and theorized. Although hers was not the only voice at this time expressing such views – for example, John Berger (1977) also underlined the gendered power relations between the object (woman) and the subject (man) as distinctive ways of seeing – hers was perhaps the most trenchant.

Much subsequent scholarship has challenged Mulvey's overdetermined and rather inflexible framing of the various subject positions that she allo-

cates to the constituent parties to the film experience, and her overdependence on psychoanalytic theory (see Gaines 1988; Gledhill 1988). These scholarly variations have often sought to problematize exactly that which Mulvey's early work tended to homogenize, in that they explore how women audiences find pleasure in female (and male) characters, and perhaps even desire those characters, as well as to distinguish other forms of identification between spectator and text/star, such as race, ethnicity, and sexuality. More contemporary scholarship takes into account the counter-narratives produced by women filmmakers, authors, and creative artists who themselves embody distinctive identity markers that manifest in their work, as well as identifying moments of textual rupture in classical film (see Brunsdon 1986; Penley 1988; Grosz 1995; Jayamanne 1995; Thornham 1999): some specific examples of such counter-narratives are provided in Chapter 5.

The Female Monster and Other Stories

One of the key Hollywood myths of femininity is what Barbara Creed (1993) describes as the monstrous-feminine. On the first page of her eponymous book, she lists the various faces of the female monster, including the amoral primeval mother (*Aliens*, 1986), the vampire (*The Hunger*, 1983), the witch (*Carrie*, 1976), woman as bleeding wound (*Dressed to Kill*, 1980), and woman as possessed (*The Exorcist*, 1973). To this list could be added any number of more contemporary horror movies with a female monster lead, such as *Species* (1995), *An American Vampire Story* (1997), the *Terminator* series, and *Alien Resurrection* (1997). For Creed, describing women in horror as monstrous-feminine rather than simply female monsters is a conscious act to signify the importance of gender (as a constructed category) in the reading of the female character as monstrous. In other words, women's sexuality is the reason why she horrifies.

If these are the ways in which women were represented historically in film, how have they been represented in more contemporary popular culture? Space precludes a full discussion, so we are restricting ourselves to a brief discussion of those genres that have attracted most scholarly attention, namely soaps, crime, action, and fantasy. We consider both film and TV shows together since what we are interested in exploring is the ways in which women are characterized in these cultural products rather than the particular medium through which they are circulated.

Considering Soaps

The soap opera, an enduring cross-generational and cross-cultural art form, has traditionally been regarded as the "woman's genre" par excellence, not simply because of its original location in the broadcast schedule, at a time when "mothers" would be at home and thus a captive audience, but because the melodramatic narrative style and structure, its preference for dialogue over action, and its focus on intimate family and community relations are regarded as particularly popular with women (McQuail 1994). In addition, the soap opera lends itself particularly well to the incorporation of familiar cultural themes and storylines. For this reason, soaps have commanded significant attention from feminist media scholars cross-culturally, with a number of important early studies setting the critical context for contemporary analyses, looking at both content and consumption (see particularly Ang 1985; Brown 1990; Hobson 1990; Geraghty 1991; Mankekar 1999). What those studies made clear was that soap opera as a genre had an important place in the lives of their women viewers, and that a significant part of the mainstream academy's disdain for the genre was rooted in both its gendered inflection and its functioning as a low-brow entertainment. Despite the clear popularity of soaps, which consistently top the ratings charts in both Western and non-Western nations, Charlotte Brunsdon (2000) is still compelled to argue, in her analysis of feminist scholarly engagements with the academic study of soaps, that there is a requirement for all of us engaged in work on popular culture to constantly defend our interests against claims of trivial pursuits.

The more popular British, American, and Australian soaps are very different in their framing of women and women's concerns, with the American serials often having rather glamorous, mostly affluent, and well-groomed actors, while Australians are a bit more homely but still mostly attractive, and British soaps are more avowedly rooted in working-class culture. However, they nonetheless narrate remarkably similar storylines about the human condition. While, as Geraghty (1991) points out, soaps do not homogenize women's experience, nor do they allow for overly transgressive renditions of femininity. The diversity of small-screen soap women and their life choices allow multiple identifications by the audience as we empathize with and rail against their good fortune and bad luck, their choice of partner, and their poor judgment. Crucially, soap characters (women and men) are portrayed as abidingly flawed individuals, who are

never wholly good or bad but, rather, struggle with the complexities of their impossible lives.

The paradox of soaps, then, is that women viewers are encouraged to empathize with soap characters who are rarely allowed to live a transgressive life outside the normative expectations of patriarchy. In the end, soap women seek fulfillment by achieving success in their personal lives, retreating into the private realm as their proper space and place. This is not to say that soaps have not dealt with important social issues or that soap women don't work outside the home, because they have and they do, but soap writers are seldom brave enough to seek structural answers to personal problems. Soap storylines *do* deal with incest, rape, racism, sexuality, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, domestic violence, and so on, but the characters who work out these storylines are forced to solve their "problems" themselves, provoking a community response that is pathologized within the private sphere. Too often, the final resolution of, say, a whispering campaign about lesbian lovers ends with their departure from the soap rather than a straightforward confrontation with the issues, with a more informed outcome.

In India, Purnima Mankekar (1999) examined soap operas and popular Hindi-language films, as well as female viewers' responses to these, prior to the early 1990s, when commercial cable stations began to supplant state-sponsored programming under the government system, Doordarshan. Mankekar found that "like the audiences of American soaps, those of Indian serials deeply identified with characters on the screen" (p. 7). Mankekar said there was a kind of "metalanguage" in the types of sets, dialogue, costumes, and music used, and viewers formed relationships with the characters depicted in serialized stories (soaps). Representations of Indian womanhood as the embodiment of morality and tradition had been major sites of contention in colonial and anti-colonial discourses, and women often represented iconic portraits of these concepts. In addition, storylines emphasized new aspirations to what she calls "middle-classness" in a society in which "class and nation have been inextricably related from the outset" (ibid., p. 9). Middle-classness in this context refers especially to Western-style consumerism.

The Crime Genre

Other than TV soaps, perhaps the genre that has attracted most interest from feminist media scholars has been the crime genre, both film and TV,

principally because this is one of the few formats that has regularly featured women in strong lead roles. With the exception of the hypermasculine figure of James Bond, whose female colleagues were rarely more than simply beautiful foils to his male hero (Lisanti & Paul 2002), any number of crime shows have featured women as either lead or strong support. James Chapman (2002) suggests that, in the context of popular British television of the 1960s, the quirky series, *The Avengers* (ITV, 1961–9), was seen by some to be the first to provide roles for women in which they were the equal of their male co-stars (Andrae 1996). The series, which originally cast two male leads, adopted a male–female pairing in the third series, most famously through the characters of Cathy Gale (Honor Blackman) and then Emma Peel (Diana Rigg). It was arguably Blackman's highly eroticized performance as a secret agent who wore "kinky" black leather that boosted the show's popularity, and generated the suggestion of a feminist hero who literally kicked ass in black stiletto-heeled, thigh-high boots. This particular narrative device (of sexual equality) was groundbreaking in the 1960s. However, this emancipatory nod was often undermined by lingering close-ups of Blackman's leather-clad curves – made to order for the male gaze.

Decades and several iterations of the female detective later, one of the most researched women characters has been DCI Jane Tennison (Helen Mirren), in the extremely successful mini-series, *Prime Suspect* (ITV, 1991–2003). Although British-made, the series has been syndicated and broadcast in many other countries. Although placing strong women characters in male occupations and in the macho world of crime-solving has been quite an advance, producers have rarely done much to challenge sexism or politicize unequal gender relations through narrative development. Indeed, even while *Prime Suspect*'s Jane Tennison and (Christine) Cagney and (Mary Beth) Lacey display a number of hypermasculine traits, such as heavy drinking, smoking, and swearing, these behaviors only appear to subvert more traditional versions of acceptable femininity. In addition, the heterosexuality of the female hero in crime dramas is enforced from the first episode to the last, denying any space for sexual ambiguity or a lesbian identity. It is precisely these lost opportunities that have exercised a number of critics, where a series explicitly focused on sex discrimination with a potentially feminist address instead becomes just another tabloid show, rather than a vehicle for transformation (Brunsdon 1998).

The increasing visibility of women in lead roles in crime fiction shows has altered forever the terrain of the crime genre; if not quite arresting its macho image, then at least confounding some of the normative

assumptions of women's place in society and showing, discursively, the ways in which women negotiate a particular kind of male space (Nunn & Biressi 2003). In the interstices of these confusions and contradictions lie precisely the possibilities and practicalities of women's diverse lives and experiences.

Women and Action Movies

The cinematic parallel of the TV crime show that features strong women is the action movie, where the number of "tough girl" lead roles has risen exponentially over the past two or three decades (see Gough-Yates & Osgerby 2001), and with each generation, the toughness of the girls has increased. Although toughness has particularly permeated women's roles in Western films, we shall also see permutations on the theme in certain contemporary Asian films featuring female martial artists. An example of the Western tough girl is Sarah Connor (*Terminator*), who is more able to withstand physical and psychological difficulties than any of Charlie's Angels. Similarly, Xena is tougher than the Bionic Woman (Inness 1999). Yvonne Tasker (1993) argues that during the 1970s, film and TV companies responded to feminism's demands for less stereotypical images of women with films such as *Klute* (1971) and *Julia* (1977), made as vehicles for strong, independent women, in both cases the role being taken up by Jane Fonda.

On television, US-produced (and globally distributed) shows such as *Charlie's Angels* (ABC, 1976–81), *Policewoman* (NBC, 1974–8), and *Wonder Woman* (ABC/CBS, 1976–9), did showcase women in lead roles, although the women actors still conformed in very obvious ways to the stereotypes of normative femininity, being beautiful, slender, and white. While most critics who look at the moment of *Charlie's Angels* see the show as part of a misogynistic, anti-feminist backlash during the 1970s, others are a little more circumspect in their condemnation. Susan Douglas (1994: 215) probably speaks for many women growing up in the 1970s who saw Farah Fawcett and her crew as suitable role models for any number of "good" reasons, "It was watching . . . women working together to solve a problem and capture, and sometimes kill really awful, sadistic men, while having great hairdos and clothes – that engaged our desire." What Douglas signals is the reality of a reading position that is intuitive rather than "feminist," but nonetheless meaningful in its own terms, speaking to the kinds of

contradictory responses that many of us (women) feel when viewing images of women who are both assertive but also icons of male fantasy.

It is interesting to note that the two film versions of the TV show which came out recently, *Charlie's Angels* (2000) and *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (2003), rework the original (white) lead actors into an ethnically diverse trio in the shape of Cameron Diaz, Lucy Liu, and Drew Barrymore. Unquestionably a marketing strategy, this move nonetheless also signals Hollywood's need to respond to a growing multicultural, global audience. The centrality of women of color in global culture has not escaped the notice of feminist postcolonial scholars such as Radhika Parameswaran (2002). She has critiqued what she calls the hegemonic packaging of ethnic culture for profit, particularly the "celebration of racial diversity as the discovery of unusual consumer experiences" (ibid., p. 229). Looking particularly at Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh, star of the celebrated martial arts film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Parameswaran sees Yeoh's character as an orientalist construct – displaying fearless, athletic grace as a warrior woman while at the same time "subtly cocooned by the vestiges of patriarchal [Western] femininity" (ibid., p. 296).

So women's strength and their performance as tough women in the contemporary action genre cannot be read off simply as progress, art reflecting life. Rather, such performances may connote a deep ambivalence about the limitations of women's flight to equality. The tough woman is testament to a still male-dominant society's own contradictory responses to women's demands for equal treatment, equal pay, and equal status (see Inness 1999). In these examples, the tough girl is nearly always stripped down (often literally) to what lies at her core, her essential, biological womanliness, her essential subordinate position to man.

Women and the Fantasy Genre

Where women often feature as leads or sidekicks to the principal hero in action genres, the circumstances in which the woman is equal to her male co-stars (heroes or villains) are mostly those where she is either an enhanced human being such as the Bionic Woman, gifted with mystical powers, or else located in the future and therefore offering no threat to the here-and-now status quo. This isn't always and everywhere the case, but those contradictions and ambivalences are common enough to constitute a pattern of representation worthy of comment. There have been any number of

women in sci-fi movies, and we are too limited by space to consider these characterizations in detail, but a brief discussion of the film and the character credited with producing the first significant action hero within the science fiction genre, Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in the *Alien* tetrology, is probably worthwhile. The aspect of Ripley's character in these films that has fascinated critics is the destabilizing effect of casting a woman hero within this particular genre, who is allowed autonomy, intelligence, and a strong survival instinct (Clover 1992) but who nonetheless performs a familiar ambiguity. Despite her considerable abilities to outwit the enemy and keep herself safe, Ripley is still made available for a voyeuristic gaze; she is still commodified as a sexual object. Discussing Ripley's role in the original *Alien* (1979), Ros Jennings (1995) articulates precisely the contradictions and tensions that are provoked by so many female hero figures, where the positive aspects of their characterizations are too easily undermined by the retreat into normative femininity. By showing Ripley's undressed body to the audience, her heroic status is neutralized:

> By rendering her available to male voyeurism, [Ridley] Scott's control of filming in the final scene ensures that in addition to the "so-called" masculine traits of bravery, technical ability and so on – all of which we have seen her demonstrate so well up to this point – she now signifies a wholly intelligible form of femininity. (Jennings 1995: 197)

Contemporary manifestations of the fantasy queen, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1997–2003) are, physically at least, little different to their earlier 1960s sisters. The character of Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) is a knowing and playful young woman, who combines the domesticated femininity of girl/witch with the kick-ass assertiveness of the action hero (Owen 1999). But Buffy provokes paradoxical readings. Her blonde, physical attractiveness and youth resonate well with male Lolita fantasies, while her skills in taking care of herself and always defeating the bad guy offer women audiences the prospect of differently powered gender relations. But is the kind of empowerment traded by Buffy merely another saleable commodity – girl-power as the latest must-have (see also Riordan 2002)? As Rachel Fudge (2001) points out, at the height of her popularity, Buffy merchandise was available from any number of US retail outlets and *Glamour* magazine did a feature on how to emulate Sarah Michelle's toned bottom.

Possibly the most discussed female figure in contemporary fantasy fiction is *Xena: Warrior Princess* (MCA Television Entertainment, 1996–

2001), who actually stands out in both the performance of her fantasy heroism as well as in her ability and expressed desire to live her life and engage in adventures without depending on men. Indeed, as Sherrie Inness (1999) points out, Xena (Lucy Lawless) has more attachment to her horse and certainly to Gabrielle (Renee O'Connor), than to any man who she encounters. The show was a spin-off from the adventures of the male hero Hercules, and one of *Xena*'s producers, Liz Friedman, makes clear the debt owed to Hercules but also the hope embodied by Xena: "Hercules is the hero we hope is out there. Xena is the hero we hope is inside us" (quoted in Weisbrot 1998: 161). But what is attractive about Xena-as-hero is her inherently flawed character: she is dark, selfish, and venally bloodthirsty. Even if the narrative insists that her triumphs are always over evil, so that she is always the force for good, there is also a clear moral ambiguity in her dealings with the world because of the way in which she arrogantly revels in parading her power and strength.

The so-called lesbian sub-text, which is often so overt as to constitute a main text (Gwenllian Jones 2000), also sets Xena apart from other fantasy heroes and adds an interesting dimension to her already complex character. But Xena is scarcely a feminist icon since, despite her clear ability to force a serious reconsideration of what a hero could and should be – that is, not necessarily *male* – she is still an immensely attractive white woman who performs arduous and dangerous feats without breaking sweat or disturbing her fringe. Her lack of need of a man is, perhaps, a step forward on the road to independence for women warriors, but she still draws the eye with her leather boots and brass bra. While one show cannot be expected to carry the burden of all women's expectations, it is precisely the scarcity of positive images of women that makes many women viewers continue to want exactly such a representation.

Beyond Straight White Lines

A careful analysis of the representation of women in the media, in both fiction and factual genres, reveals significant differences in the ways in which the object "woman" is constructed along highly codified lines in terms of ethnicity, age, sexuality, and disability. While the kinds of genre analyses in which we engage above might signal the various personal identifiers of, say, Buffy or Ripley or Sue Ellen, what a discussion of those characters does not necessarily also demonstrate is the *absence* of so many

women – women of color, lesbians, disabled women, older women. This is not to say that they do not feature in the popular media landscape, but it is to argue that they are often absent in circumstances when they would be present in real life (and soaps are a good example of realist genres that almost willfully refuse to include a realistic diversity of women – see Bourne 1998). Where they *do* feature, they often bear the burden of multiple stereotyping.

Comes in other colors

In response to the failure of mainstream feminism to address the interrelated themes of race and gender in representation, a number of feminist media researchers of color have worked hard to bring to light, in every sense of the word, the numerous (and different) ways in which the race–gender–culture nexus functions in film and television (see Bobo 1988; hooks 1991, 1992, 1996; Mankekar 1999; Malik 2002; Parameswaran 2002). In Lola Young's astutely titled book on this subject, *Fear of the Dark* (1996), she traces the provenance of contemporary African Caribbean women characters found in British cinema back to the much earlier slave period and the circulation of racist and sexist images of African Caribbean women. Those images have since informed the contemporary popular characterization of African Caribbean women as prostitutes, feckless single mothers, nurses, and other public-sector workers. As an actor, Young recalls being persistently typecast:

> After having several years experience as a professional actor in a children's television series, I was asked to play a bus conductor, a prostitute, a nurse. Later . . . I was asked to play a witch in Macbeth: I wanted to play Shakespeare, so I did. Eventually, I didn't enjoy these limited roles so I stopped acting. (1996: 1)

Through her work on race in mainstream (white-framed) texts, Young identifies the continued circulation and promotion of racist and sexist myths of African Caribbean women as manifest in "Empire" films such as *Sanders of the River* (1935) and their contemporary resonances in films such as *Mona Lisa* (1986). Carmen Gillespie (1999) undertakes a similar archaeological task when she maps Hattie McDaniels's portrayal of Mammy in *Gone With The Wind* (1939) against the contemporary figuring of Molly Abrams (Gina Ravera) in the soft-core porn movie, *Showgirls* (1995). For

Young (1996), such stereotypes (past and present) speak to the historical period in which they are elaborated, and African Caribbean women characters are often appropriated as mechanisms through which racialized differences between competing masculinities are played out, ciphers in the struggle for control (see also Manatu 2002; Smith-Shomade 2002). The shifting shape of African Caribbean characterizations can therefore be seen as indicators of a given society's feelings of ease about itself and a product of specific global sociopolitical moments and ideological positions in relation to notions of "us" and "them" (Malik 2002). Indeed, the African Caribbean or exoticized female "other" provides a benchmark against which white femininity under patriarchy can be better understood and the normative nature of whiteness itself, as an ethnic category rendered visible and problematized (Negra 2001).

However, in discussing the ways in which the cinematic representation of African Caribbean women have been inadequate, Young and others (see Ross 1996, 1997a) caution against the suggestion that "negative" stereotypes can be substituted with more positive ones that would have a wider currency amongst the communities from which such characterizations are drawn. Is it even possible to represent the "real" African Caribbean experience, even if everyone involved in any given production is part of that same community? Such questions of authenticity are always present when race is present, but that concern is more overt when screenplays are based on material written by minority ethnic authors. For example, there was considerable criticism generated against Steven Spielberg's screen adaptation of Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, made in 1985, and again when Terry McMillan's novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, was made into a film (1996).

A significant aspect of the critique of such films has been focused around how "real" they are in their depictions of African American life (Carstarphen 1999), even as such films often receive an enthusiastic reception by many members of African American communities. Once again, these different takes on the same text demonstrate how the possession of the gaze and the "reading off" of texts is highly personal and entirely subjective. This is not to say that individual analyses are not worth doing, but it is to offer a reminder that critiquing a text for its impact on real people, looking for a cause–effect outcome, is not as fixed or immutable as some commentators might suggest.

The great majority of studies that are published in English and undertaken on the image of women in entertainment media focus on women in Western cultures, and while problematizing the gender relations that often

attend plotlines, especially where women are lead characters, the category "woman" is often homogenized even though she is nearly always white. Such issues have been taken up by a number of postcolonial scholars such as Radhika Parameswaran (2002), who reveal the complex ways in which women's representation has been influenced by culture, class, colonial, and national processes. They are also concerned with showing how the oppression of men under colonial domination makes it essential to examine depictions of both male and female gender roles.

However, for balance, we should also include an example of a more positive response to a screen adaptation of a African American novel, in this case, *The Women of Brewster Place*, which was a two-part adaptation of Gloria Naylor's novel, first aired on ABC in 1989. It tells the story of a group of women living in a run-down neighborhood through their relationships with each other. It attained a certain amount of publicity partly because its primary character and executive producer was Oprah Winfrey, who used her own celebrity to urge ABC to broadcast the serial (Bobo & Seiter 1991). It was also the first time that a woman (Donna Deitch) had been hired to undertake a film adaptation of work by a black woman novelist. Although, as Bobo and Seiter argue, the serial contained the routine elements of melodrama and soap, it also discussed less common themes, such as the community to be found between African American women, the importance of their peer support, and issues around violence, racism, sexism, and homophobia. While a (small) screen adaptation of an important novel rarely does justice to the complexities and nuances of the latter, *The Women of Brewster Place* tried to remain faithful to the original book. The show symbolizes the enormous possibilities for honest, interesting representations of women in media when women are in control of scripts and production.

The brief discussion above looks at the critiques of the images of women of color in mainstream, Western entertainment media, but what about the representation of other women, other identities, other geographies? Sheena Malhotra and Everett Rogers's work (2000) shifts the Anglocentric gaze eastward in a study that explores the rapid development of private satellite television in India that occurred during the 1990s, analyzing the shifts in the representation of women which that technology ushered in. For these authors, new media developments transformed the routine and traditional image of woman as housewife and mother to images of women who existed as sexual beings, had adopted Western lifestyles, and often worked outside the home. However, as we have seen elsewhere, women's newly found

empowerment is severely compromised by their mediated construction within the boundaries of existing patriarchal relations. Thus the progressive potential of more modern images is too often defeated by a lack of progress in the real world.

Portrait of a lesbian

Issues of race and gender have received critical analysis in large part because of the efforts of feminist scholars of color insisting on identifying a clear politics of difference within mainstream feminist activity. Lesbian representation in fictional media has received rather less attention, although there is a growing literature on the topic. The inclusion of lesbian characters in soaps and drama has been a rather hit-and-miss affair, with efforts often foundering because storylines focus exclusively on sexuality rather than character development. Darlene Hantzis and Valerie Lehr (1994) suggest that early attempts to signal lesbian and gay sexuality in mainstream entertainment media often resulted in what they describe as one-off "featured" characters; that is, they featured *because* they were lesbian or gay, often introducing some kind of camp element into an otherwise mainstream comedy show, or a more murderous or psychotic element in many police dramas and mainstream films (Croteau & Hoynes 1997). As Young (1996) and others have identified, a very typical role for an African Caribbean female actor to play is as a prostitute, especially one who gets killed, and Cathy Tyson's portrayal of the African Caribbean lesbian prostitute, Simone, in *Mona Lisa* (1986) manages to score several stereotypical hits with one character. While the film attracted considerable acclaim, with some critics even suggesting that the teaming of Tyson and [Bob] Hoskins was "inspired" (Bourne 1998: 184), others were less positive. The film critic Louis Heaton comments that:

> Cathy Tyson's Simone, though competently acted, lacks both credibility and character. Despite their obvious best intentions, the filmmakers have given us yet another stereotyped "hard"; black woman whose hatred of men manifests itself in lesbianism. (Heaton, quoted in Bourne 1998: 186)

By the late 1980s, there was a small but visible push toward the inclusion of lesbian and gay characters as part of ensemble casts in serial dramas, as the hitherto taboo subject of homosexuality had been recognized for its commercial potential (Moritz 1994). In 1988, in the United States, ABC

began to broadcast a new show, *Heartbeat*, set in a women's medical center and featuring Marilyn McGrath (Gail Strickland) as a nurse practitioner who also happened to be a mother and lesbian. However, it folded after less than a season because of poor ratings (Moritz 1994). Another early example of a US mainstream show's efforts (which also ultimately failed) to incorporate a lesbian character is *L.A. Law*. The show had a bisexual female character in the early 1990s in the shape of C. J. Lamb (Amanda Donohoe) but she only appeared in season five and by the end of season six she had been erased from the show. The show has since attracted a lesbian cult following, despite the infrequent appearances of C. J., but such is the desire to identify with her amongst lesbian audiences that infrequency was still better than invisibility:

> Given the fact that so few lesbian and gay characters appear on television, it could be argued that *any* portrayals of lesbians and gays that are not clearly negative should be valued. (Hantzis & Lehr 1994: 118 – original emphasis)

When Jeanette Winterson's novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* was adapted for television and screened in the United Kingdom in 1990, it was scheduled in what Hilary Hinds describes as the controversy slot, a prime-time evening slot reserved for risky and adult material, most usually portraying sex scenes (Hinds 1992). With *Oranges*, the explicit sexual nature of the narrative was even riskier than usual, since scenes of lesbian sex were (and are still) rare on mainstream TV. However, Hinds argues that despite the author's explicit intention to subvert the normative assumptions around home, church, and sexuality in the piece, most critics' positive reception of the work was because they saw it as an allegory of the human condition – we are all seeking love – not because they understood the lesbian love story at its core. In particular, given the relatively circumscribed nature of lesbian characters in most mainstream shows, one-off screenings such as *Oranges* or the more overtly erotic *Tipping the Velvet* (BBC, 2002, adapted from the novel by Sarah Waters), provide more credible and complex characterizations than the 2-D women we more usually see, devoid of passion, tortured, dependent, passive.

While lesbian and gay characters can be safely domesticated and their potency neutralized by their framing as figures of (albeit witty) fun, as in the US programs *Will and Grace* (KoMut Entertainment, 1998–) or *Queer as Folk* (Channel 4, 2002–), or even the eponymous *Graham Norton* (So Television, 2001–), when the reality of sexual passion is played out in the

living room, there are often vociferous complaints. On Christmas Eve 1993, the UK's Channel 4 soap, *Brookside* (Mersey Television, 1982–2003), featured the first lesbian kiss on TV between Beth (Anna Friel) and Margaret (Nicola Stevenson), prompting a deluge of complaints from offended viewers. However, when Channel 4 cut the scene from the omnibus version screened later that week, there were corresponding complaints about their crass decision:[1] in 2002, "the kiss" featured at 59th place in Channel 4's viewer-determined top 100 sexiest moments.[2] Similarly, Larry Gross (1994) points to the furore surrounding the character of C. J. Lamb in *L.A. Law*, when she kissed another woman attorney in one episode in 1991.

On the face of it, all these efforts to include lesbians in the media landscape are laudable but, sadly, they have nearly always been extremely short-lived: lesbians come and go with unseemly haste. The fanfare that heralded Della and Binnie's arrival in *EastEnders* (BBC, 1985–) was quickly muted when they left to start a "new life" in Ibiza less than 12 months later. Clearly, there is a structural dynamic within soaps that requires regular upheaval and controversy, but the problem with lesbian characters is that they are never firmly integrated within the fabric of a particular soap or drama: once storylines focused on their sexuality have been exhausted, they are written out of the narrative rather than allowed to play an "ordinary" part in the life of their particular community.

Program-makers are mostly unwilling to "represent women's desires because [they are] unwilling to threaten heterosexuality and the heterosexist male role of definer and center of female relationships" (Hantzis & Lehr 1994: 119). However, the more routine lesbian characters that now occasionally populate US mainstream series such as *ER* (Warner Bros, 1994–), and even *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (UPN, 1997–), suggest that lesbian lifestyles might eventually be "normalized" within the fictional worlds of entertainment media. And there continue to be "firsts" in television's relationship with sexuality: in October 2000, the long-running US soap, *All My Children* (ABC, 1970–) took a bold step when 16-year-old Bianca Montgomery (Eden Reigel) came out as lesbian and did so in a lesbian bar. As C. Lee Harrington (2003) remarks, both the outing and the venue were remarkable for their never-before-in-daytime-soap novelty.

However, there remains a tentativeness about *really* dealing with sexuality, so that even in the relatively progressive characterization of Bianca, she is not part of a lesbian group, her love affairs mostly take place off camera, and the community around her shows total and unrealistically unconditional support (Harrington 2003). Nonetheless, the more-rounded lesbian

characters exemplified by Bianca or Willow (*Buffy*) or Kerry Weaver (*ER*) are unarguably more appealing and more credible than the badly drawn psychopaths who populated the media landscape in the 1970s and 1980s. Part of this shift is due in no small part to the cynical recognition on the part of film- and program-makers, that the pink pound has considerable purchasing power (Becker 1998). The production appeal to the affluent middle-class, well-educated white lesbian does of course prompt concern over the simple substitution of one set of stereotypes for another, since many TV genres rely heavily on their audience's implicit understanding and recognition of particular stereotypes.

Conclusion

What we have attempted to show in this chapter are the various ways in which the subject "woman" has been portrayed in popular television and film, principally over the past 30 years. There is no doubt that the landscape for women has changed considerably over that period, and that images and plotlines that are now routine would simply have been inconceivable 30 years ago. To a large extent, this really is a case of art following life, since women's progress must eventually be mirrored on the large and small screen. Since at least 2000, *Law & Order* (Universal, 1990–) has had a woman chief, strong women have lead roles in the most popular soaps, lesbian doctors feature in *ER*, and Jessica Fletcher (Angela Lansbury) enjoyed repeat success on BBC in 2004 as the pensioner detective in *Murder She Wrote* (CBS, 1984–96). In other words, women's representation today is certainly "better," in many ways, than ever before. Sometimes, this has come about through women film- and program-makers subverting routine, stereotypical, and normative versions of their lives, by taking control of the camera and producing their own material. Sometimes, it has come about through working with men in alternative and mainstream production. But as women still experience actual prejudice and discrimination in terms of unequal treatment, unequal pay, and unequal value in real life, then so too do these themes continue to occur in media portraits. We hope that we have shown some of these contradictory impulses and the uneven nature of women's progress on both the large and small screens. We argue for women's greater control over the representations of their and our lives, so that the wonderful diversity of all our experiences becomes incorporated in the popular media landscape.

Notes

1   See www.bbc.co.uk/drama/tipping/article_1.shtml (accessed September 23, 2004).
2   See www.channel4.com/film/newsfeatures/microsites/S/sexy/nominees_b4.html (accessed September 23, 2004).