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2

Feminist Perspectives on the Media

Liesbet van Zoonen

With the current proliferation and fragmentation of feminist theory and politics, reviewing feminist perspectives on the media has become a hazardous task. A general overview of the field can hardly do justice to the variety of feminist discourse while advancing one's own particular approach inevitably excludes other, often equally valid feminist discourses. In this chapter I shall use both approaches. While I cannot deny my own political and academic preferences, I do hope to provide a framework general enough to understand historical developments and recent trends in feminist media studies.

How does feminist media theory distinguish itself from other perspectives such as postmodernism, pluralism, neo-marxism, etc.? Its unconditional focus on analyzing *gender* as a mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them, is hard to find in other theories of the media. Even by mid and late seventies mainstream communication scholars did not seem to be very interested in the subject 'woman'. 'And why should they? Before the advent of the women's movement these [sex-role] stereotypes seemed natural, "given". Few questioned how they developed, how they were reinforced, or how they were maintained. Certainly the media's role in this process was not questioned' (Tuchman, 1978: 5). Nor were critical communication scholars in the forefront of recognizing the importance of gender, as the account of the Women's Studies Group of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham confirms: 'We found it extremely difficult to participate in the CCCS groups and felt, without being able to articulate it, that it was a case of the masculine domination of both intellectual work and the environment in which it was being carried out' (*Women Take Issue*, 1978: 11).

The situation has improved to a certain extent. There seems to be a hesitant acknowledgement of the necessity and viability of feminist approaches to the media. Academic journals of communications have published review articles of feminist media studies and sometimes devoted whole issues to it (*Communication*, 1986; Dervin, 1987; Foss and Foss,

1983; *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 1987; McCormack, 1978; Rakow, 1986; Smith, 1983; Steeves, 1987; van Zoonen, 1988). However, in 'general' reviews of main trends in communication theory and research one finds few traces of this growing body of feminist scholarship. In special issues about communications research in western and eastern Europe published by the *European Journal of Communication and Media, Culture and Society* (1990) references to gender or feminism are all but absent.

In the field of cultural studies feminist concerns have gained more ground. Many innovating studies about 'women's genres' such as soap operas, romance novels and women's magazines and their audiences have informed and have been informed by this approach (e.g. Hobson, 1982; Modleski, 1982; Radway, 1984; Winship, 1987). Moreover, authors such as Fiske (1987) and Morley (1986) addressing other issues in cultural studies, have incorporated gender in their research as one of the crucial mechanisms in structuring our cultural experiences and our outlook on daily life. Notwithstanding the successful and inspiring conjunction of feminist and cultural studies, not all feminist studies are cultural studies, and not all cultural studies are feminist studies. I shall elaborate the former as I review different feminist perspectives later on. The latter brings me to a second distinctive feature of feminist media studies.

The feminist academic venture is intrinsically political. In the early years of the revived movement, a concurrence of research writing and political activism was common practice. A typical example is Betty Friedan's research about the construction of the American cultural ideal of 'the happy housewife-heroine' in women's magazines and advertisements.¹ The book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was an immediate bestseller and gave rise to a revival of the women's movement which had been dormant since the successful struggle for women's suffrage. One of the first 'second wave' feminist groups was the *National Organisation of Women*, headed by Betty Friedan. Not surprisingly, NOW declared the media to be one of the major sites of struggle for the movement: in the spring of 1970 approximately 100 women occupied the offices of *The Ladies Home Journal* demanding among other things a female editor in chief, a child care centre for employees and the publication of a 'liberated issue' to be compiled by the protestors. At least one feminist supplement to the *Journal* appeared. A nationwide research project monitoring television networks and local stations for sexist content was conducted with the intention to challenge the licence of any station with a sexist record when it came up for renewal before the Federal Communications Commissions (Hole and Levine, 1972: 264). Although by the beginning of the eighties much feminist research came from the academy, its political nature remained, therewith fundamentally undermining the dominant academic paradigm, of objectivity, neutrality and detachment. For example, Tuchman (1978: 38), introducing one of the first volumes about women and the media, asks herself: 'How can the media be changed? . . . How can we free women from the tyranny of media messages limiting their lives to hearth and home?' The book concludes with a chapter discussing the policy implications of the research material presented. Numerous other academic publications conclude with recommendations for change (e.g. Creedon, 1989; Gallagher, 1980; Thoveron, 1986).

With its substantial project, it is the reciprocal relation between theory, politics and activism, the commitment of feminist academics to have their work contribute to a larger feminist goal – however defined, the blurred line between the feminist as academic and the feminist as activist, that distinguishes feminist perspectives on the media from other possible perspectives. Paradoxically, as I shall try to show in this review, the growing theoretical and empirical sophistication of feminist media studies has not only jeopardized its relevance for a critical feminist media politics but also diminished its potential as a comprehensive cultural critique. For example, as we acknowledge the pleasure women derive from watching soap operas, it becomes increasingly difficult to find moral justifications for criticizing their contribution to the hegemonic construction of gender identities. To disentangle this paradox I shall first discuss liberal, radical and socialist feminist discourses which share – in spite of their many differences – a social control model of communication, and a conceptualization of gender as a dichotomous category with a historically stable and universal meaning.

Liberal, Radical and Socialist Feminism

Classifying feminism in three neatly separated ideological currents is certainly at odds with the present fragmentation of feminist thought. It seems hard to include, for example, postmodern and psychoanalytic trends satisfactorily in this tripartition. Also, feminist theory and practice is often rather eclectic, incorporating elements from different ideologies as circumstances and issues necessitate. As a result few feminist media studies can be unequivocally classified in one of the three categories. However, taken as ideal types – which I shall do here – they are indicative of the various ways in which feminists perceive the media. Although less dominant than in the seventies and early eighties, they still underlie many feminist self-perceptions and analysis.²

Liberal Feminism

In liberal feminist discourse irrational prejudice and stereotypes about the supposedly natural role of women as wives and mothers account for the unequal position of women in society. General liberal principles of liberty and equality should apply to women as well. 'Equal Rights' or 'reformist' feminism are other labels for these principles which find their political translation in attempts to change legislation, in affirmative action programs, in stimulating women to take up non-traditional roles and occupations and to develop masculine qualities to acquire power. Such role reversal is much less strongly advocated for men.

Sex role stereotypes, prescriptions of sex-appropriate behaviour, appearance, interests, skills and self-perceptions are at the core of liberal feminist media analyses (Tuchman, 1978: 5). Numerous quantitative content analyses have shown that women hardly appear in the mass media, be it depicted as

wife, mother, daughter, girlfriend; as working in traditionally female jobs (secretary, nurse, receptionist); or as sex-object. Moreover they are usually young and beautiful, but not very well educated. Experimental research done in the tradition of cognitive psychology tends to support the hypothesis that media act as socialization agents – along with the family – teaching children in particular their appropriate sex roles and symbolically rewarding them for appropriate behaviour (cf. Busby, 1975; Gallagher, 1980). It is thought that media perpetuate sex role stereotypes because they reflect dominant social values and also because male media producers are influenced by these stereotypes.

The solutions liberal feminism offers are twofold: women should obtain more equal positions in society, enter male-dominated fields and acquire power. With a time lag mass media will reflect this change. Meanwhile, media can contribute to change by portraying more women and men in non-traditional roles and by using non-sexist language. The strategies liberal feminists have developed to reach these goals are many: teaching 'non-sexist professionalism' in Schools of Journalism (van Zoonen, 1989); creating awareness among broadcasters and journalists about stereotypes and their effects; putting 'consumer pressure' on media institutions, especially on advertisers; demanding affirmative action policies of media institutions (cf. Thoveron, 1986). Liberal media strategies have had some unwarranted consequences. The emphasis on role reversal for women in particular has created a new stereotype of 'Superwoman', the response of commercial culture to the demands of liberal feminism. Women's magazines and advertisements portray her as an independent and assertive career woman, a successful wife and mother, who is still beautiful and has kept the body she had as a girl in perfect shape. Real women trying to live up to this image end up suffering from serious burn-out symptoms (Dowling, 1989).

Another unforeseen consequence of liberal strategies is showing painfully in developments in the media workforce. The numbers of female journalists have increased considerably in recent years with the United States in the forefront (MRTW, 1989). Sadly enough, however, as American researchers have observed 'a female majority in the field does not translate into superior power or influence for women: instead, it has been translated to mean a decline in salaries and status for the field' (Creedon, 1989: 3). In part these problems arise from liberal feminism's disregard for socio-economic structures, and power relations. Social conflict is presented as a difference of opinion which can be resolved through rational argumentation. This assumption is reflected in the emphasis on strategies which imply teaching and raising awareness of (male) media producers, and in the rather optimistic belief that media institutions can be changed from within by female media professionals. That men – as radical feminists would argue – or consumer capitalism – as socialist feminists would argue – have vested interests in maintaining their power over women, does not easily fit in the ideal of rational disinterested argumentation.

Radical Feminism

In radical feminist discourse 'patriarchy', a social system in which all men are assumed to dominate and oppress all women, accounts for women's position in society. Patriarchy is conceived to be the result of men's innately wicked inclination to dominate women, a genetically determined need which they can fulfil – in the last instance – by exercising their physical strength. Radical feminists have been in the forefront of exposing male abuse of women and politicizing issues formerly considered as private: sexual violence, wife battering, incest, pornography, and more recently, sex tourism and trafficking in women. It is obvious that men can have no place in radical feminist utopias. In order to free themselves completely women have to cut off all ties with men and male society, and form their own communities. Lesbianism therefore is necessarily following political choice – another example of the radical politicization of the personal.

Since mass media are in the hands of male owners and producers, they will operate to the benefit of a patriarchal society. Apparently this premise does not need further research, given the few media studies that have been conducted from a radical feminist perspective. The main focus is on pornography and rather polemical: 'Pornography exists because men despise women, and men despise women because pornography exists' (Dworkin, 1980: 289). In radical feminist media analyses the power of the media to affect men's behaviour towards women and women's perception of themselves is beyond discussion: 'Researchers may have been unable to prove a direct connection between any particular instance of media and any particular act, but *there can be no doubt* that media distortion contributes to a general climate of discrimination and abuse of women' (Davies et al., 1988: 6, author italics).

The media strategies of radical feminism are straightforward: women should create their own means of communication. Technological developments in print and audiovisual media made the proliferation of feminist writing, newsletters, magazines, radio and TV programmes, video and film groups possible. A host of feminine ideas would otherwise have not received a public forum (Kessler, 1984). Most media are produced by a collective of volunteers, who usually work without profits motives and share responsibilities. Radical feminist logic does not allow for hierarchies; they are thought to be a perversion of masculine society. Contributions are anonymous or signed with first names only since it is assumed that all women share the same kind of patriarchal oppression.

Radical media strategies have been more problematic than they seemed at first sight: the belief that women together – all innately good people – would be able to work without competition, hierarchy or specialization, and would write or film from the same source of essential femininity, proved an illusion. A constant feature of radical feminist media has been internal conflict about organization and editorial policy. Power differences, difference of opinion and interests appear to exist among women also, and are not a male preserve. Another dilemma has been posed by the inability of feminist media to attract readers and audiences beyond the feminist parish. While their self-proclaimed aim often is to inform and mobilize larger audiences, movement media tend to

fulfil more of a ritual function. With the waning enthusiasm for collective expressions of feminism, the circulation figures of feminist media declined rather dramatically resulting in the demise of many of them.³

In its pure form, radical feminist media analyses have not gained much ground. However, many elements of it are also found in other theories. Socialist feminism incorporates the concept of patriarchal ideology in its marxist analysis of women's position, without however adopting its essentialist stance. The conviction that differences between men and women are essentially biological has emerged in other feminist perspectives as well. French feminists drawing heavily from psychoanalytic theory have very sophisticatedly located the difference between men and women in the different structure of male and female genitals, considering, for example, classic linear narrative structure as an expression of masculine, goal oriented sexuality. French feminist theory has particularly influenced literary and film studies, but is rare in studies of mass media (e.g. Mattelart, 1986). The solution for women's position is not sought in withdrawing from patriarchal culture, but in creating new and legitimate spaces for the feminine voice, supposedly more process oriented. This has been extremely successful in the area of women's writing, but the feminist avant-garde film of the seventies never acquired a large following (e.g. Pribram, 1988).

Socialist Feminism

Unlike radical and liberal feminism, socialist feminism does not focus exclusively on gender to account for women's position, but attempts to incorporate an analysis of class and economic conditions of women as well. Central concepts are 'the reproduction of labour' and 'the economic value of domestic labour'. Although not recognized as such, the nurturing, moral, educational and domestic work women do in the family is said to be indispensable for the maintenance of capitalism. Were all this labour to be paid, the profit margins of capitalism would be critically diminished (cf. Zaretsky, 1986). Socialist feminism shares with liberal feminism an emphasis on the need for women to take up paid labour. However, at the same time a fundamental restructuring of the labour market is called for, in which the average labour week is reduced to 25 hours so that women and men have time left to share nurturing and domestic responsibilities.

More recently, socialist feminism has tried to incorporate other social divisions along the lines of ethnicity, sexual preference, age, physical ability, since the experience of, for example, black, lesbian and single women did not fit nicely in the biased gender/class earlier model. This has resulted in an increasingly complicated and incoherent theoretical project, which until now has not produced a satisfactory account of the way material and cultural conditions interact. More and more, ideology in itself has become the main object of study. The work of Althusser, stating the relative autonomy of ideological *apparatuses* like the family, school, church and the media vis à vis the economic conditions, and the work of Gramsci analyzing how dominant ideology takes on the form of common sense (*hegemony*) have been particularly influential in socialist feminism. Cultural Studies

approaches to gender and media, that I shall discuss later, build on these concepts of ideology. Many authors (e.g. Steeves, 1987) place them in the same category. I suggest it is important to distinguish between socialist feminist discourse and cultural studies approaches due to their different conceptualizations of power. In socialist feminist discourse power remains located in socio-economic structures, be it mediated through the relatively autonomous level of ideology. Cultural studies approaches account for power as a discursive practice that can appear independent from material conditions. The distinction however is one of emphasis; both are reluctant to focus on gender exclusively and try to incorporate material and cultural conditions in accounting for women's position in society.

In its most crude form, the socialist feminist communication model of the seventies clings to radical models in which media are perceived to be ideological instruments presenting the capitalist and patriarchal society as the natural order. However, socialist feminism is distinguished by a much greater concern for the way in which ideologies of femininity are constructed in the media, and to whose avail? Much of its research consists of ideological analysis of media texts, using the analytic instrumentarium offered by structuralism and semiology (e.g. Coward, 1984). The solutions socialist feminism offers are not so much different from liberal or radical media strategies. Usually a double strategy is advocated: reforming the mainstream media as well as producing separate feminist media. What distinguishes the socialist call for female media producers is an awareness of the middle class bias of that strategy (e.g. Baehr, 1981) and the acknowledgement that at the same time structural changes in the organization of media labour are necessary. For example, a Dutch pressure group of feminist journalists campaigned rather successfully for affirmative action policies in journalism, increase of part-time job possibilities, parental leave and childcare facilities at the newspapers office (Diekerhof et al., 1985).

Concepts of Gender and Communication

Strategies for change follow logically from liberal, radical and socialist feminist media analyses. They aim either at reforming existing media institutions and professions, or at creating new feminist 'institutions' and developing proper feminine and feminist interpretations of professionalism. However, with the privilege of hindsight, we are now in a position to observe how useful these strategies have been. It would appear that some of them have not been very successful. Some even seem to have been counterproductive, as in the case of American journalism becoming a female-dominated field reduced in status and salaries. Such political disillusiones are intricately linked to theoretical flaws which all three perspectives share. These flaws concern the conceptualization of gender as a dichotomous category with a homogeneous and universal meaning, and the premise of mass media being instrumental to the control needs of respectively, society, patriarchy, and capitalism.

Gender

Radical and liberal feminism share their appreciation of gender as an inevitable consequence of sex differences, consisting of two binary and universal canons of behaviour, characteristics and values found either in women – the feminine canon – or in men – the masculine canon. Femininity is supposed to be composed of emotionality, prudence, cooperation, communal sense, compliance, etc. Masculinity supposedly is its opposite: rationality, efficiency, competition, individualism, ruthlessness, etc. Liberal feminism has it that we learn to accept these canons as normal through women's mothering role in the family and through other socialization agents like the media, while radical feminism believes in the essential nature of these differences. Transgressions of this dichotomy, manifested for example in androgynous appearances like Grace Jones and Prince, in certain types of lesbian and homosexual culture, in the phenomenon of transsexuality, and more routinely in daily lives and experiences of women and men whose behaviour and characteristics do not fit easily in the feminine or masculine canon, are considered exceptions to the thus defined universal 'sex-gender system'.

Consider the 'sameness-difference' dilemma such a universal transcendent concept of gender runs into: for liberal feminism women are *essentially the same as men but not equal*; for radical feminism women are *essentially different from men and not equal*. (It is most easy to explain this dilemma by juxtaposing liberal and radical feminism. That is not to say, however that socialist feminism is less bothered by it.) Liberal feminism urges women in particular to regain that sameness becoming equal in the process. Radical feminism tells women to celebrate their being different and to struggle for a social revaluation of femininity. Both solutions are intrinsically problematic. Liberal feminism implicitly accepts the values of the protestant work ethic basic to modern capitalism by telling women to leave their domestic world, enter the (male) workforce and develop the masculine features necessary to acquire power. Masculinity is advocated as an ideal to live up to, at the expense of human values traditionally associated with women. Role reversal might render equality to women, but in the process important 'feminine' values are dismissed and lost. This is an outcome no liberal feminist aspires to, it is thus argued that women should go public without forsaking their femininity. Moreover their supposedly moral superiority should feed and improve the degenerated public world (cf. Elshtain, 1981). In feminist media studies this liberal dogma is reflected in the call for more female journalists whose specific feminine input of concern for human relations and personal experiences would improve the current distanced and dehumanized news style (e.g. Neverla and Kanzleiter, 1984). There is a theoretical inconsistency here: whilst the essential sameness of women and men is used to legitimize demands for equality, difference enters again through the backdoor as women need their specific 'feminine' features to modify the egalitizing consequences of the struggle for equality. The rather naive assumption that dominant masculine culture would easily make room for its necessary feminine complementation has more important practical consequences. As already mentioned, the recent increase of the number of female journalists in

the US has not led to an increase in their influence, but instead to a devaluation of the status and the salaries of the field (Creedon, 1989: 3). The remaining option for liberal feminism then seems to be a mere adjustment strategy: equality as defined by dominant masculine culture; 'equal but the same'.

Radical feminist assumptions of essential differences between women and men, and their call for separate women's spaces and communities are equally problematic. They imply a return to an ontological explanation of human differences introducing a tyranny of biological destiny historically used to circumscribe women's place in society. As such radical feminism has the same totalitarian tendencies as its main antagonist patriarchal society. How, for instance, can radical feminism perceive women who do not conform to their supposedly innate femininity, other than as genetical deviations? (cf. Elshtain, 1981: 204–28). Radical feminist strategies inevitably condemn women to a marginal position: they will be either oppressed suffering from false consciousness within patriarchal society which is supposed to be beyond reform. Or they choose to step out of patriarchal society being free and true to their nature but remaining isolated and marginal, as for instance the lifecycle of radical feminist media illustrates. The problem is similar in psychoanalytic essentialist currents: 'For if, as some psychoanalytic theories appear to suggest, social subjects are determined through family relations and language acquisition, *prior* to the introduction of other considerations, including race, class, personal background or historical moment, the social construct thus described is a closed system unamenable to other subject formations' (Pribram, 1988: 6). In radical feminist discourse the inevitable outcome of the sameness-difference dilemma is 'different but not equal'.

This paralyzing dilemma is a product of radical and liberal conceptualizations of gender as having a universal and transcendent meaning. Feminist philosophers and historians have pointed to the historical specificity of the idea that men are political and rational, while women would be more personal, emotional and inclined to nurture. Landes (1988) locates the origins of these ideas in the work of Rousseau, Montesquieu and other philosophers of the French Revolution, who inspired republicans to banish women to the home and called men to their supposedly natural fulfilment in the world of politics. The resulting gendering of the public and the private sphere as we know it today, feeding many (feminist) discourses about the meaning of gender, can thus be considered to be a historically specific construction, by no means universal and transcendent. Thus not only has the French Revolution banished women to the family, it has also succeeded in imprisoning feminist theory and politics in its philosophical framework (cf. van Zoonen, 1991). An acknowledgement of the historical specificity of current dominant beliefs about women and men opens up new ways of conceptualizing gender, not as universally given, but as socially constructed. The issue, then, is no longer how to promote a certain type of femininity as in radical feminism, or how to dismiss femininity and masculinity altogether as in liberal feminism, but rather to analyze how and why particular constructions of masculinity and femininity arise in historical contexts, how and why certain constructions gain dominance over others and how dominant constructions relate to the lived realities of women and men.

Communication

Liberal, radical and socialist feminist discourse share an instrumental perspective on communication. Media are perceived as the main instruments in conveying respectively stereotypical, patriarchal and hegemonic values about women and femininity. They serve as mechanisms of social control: in liberal feminist discourse media pass on society's heritage – which is deeply sexist – in order to secure continuity, integration, order and the transmission of dominant values (Tuchman, 1978); radical feminism argues that patriarchal media serve the needs of patriarchal society by suppressing and distorting women's experiences which, if expressed in their true form, would seriously disturb the patriarchal set up (Mattelart, 1986); socialist feminism assumes that media present the capitalist, patriarchal scheme of things as the most attractive system available. Direct social control becomes unnecessary since dominant ideology has been translated into 'common sense' (*Women Take Issue*, 1978). Media fulfil the structural needs of respectively democratic, patriarchal and capitalist society by transmitting its distorted dominant values about women. What feminism of each kind advocates is the transmission of the reality of women's lives instead: media should be instrumental to creating feminist utopias. Feminist value judgements are thus completely cast in future oriented political terms, with 'political' referring to the complete social set-up. As a result 'good' media – contributing to feminist goals – and 'bad' media – maintaining the status quo, are easily distinguished. Supposedly, it is only a matter of time for women's collective awareness to surface resulting in a massive exchange of 'bad' women's magazines, romance novels, etc. for 'good' feminist media.

In the 1990s, however, having more than 20 years of organized feminism behind us, Utopia is still far from near. A variety of new women's magazines have entered the market successfully adapting to the fragmentation of a formerly unified female readership: girls, young women, older women, career women, rich housewives, the avid cook or gardener, ordinary working women, travelling women and the traditional housewife all happily subscribe to their own kind of women's magazine; romance novels have introduced new heroines profoundly touched by feminist calls for independence, but still longing for and always attaining heterosexual everlasting romance; soap operas like *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest* and its successors – a typical 1980s television genre – attract a predominantly female audience in spite of its 'overtly' sexist, patriarchal and capitalist content; and feminist media struggle with reaching a larger audience, attracting advertisers, maintaining their old audience, or suffer from internal conflict or simply boredom. Obviously the feminist transmission model of communication cannot account for these developments, other than plaintively reproaching the avid consumers of the 'bad' media with 'false consciousness'. I suggest instead to ascribe this ineptitude to the realistic bend and the passive audience conception of the model.

Realism

It is obvious that many aspects of women's lives and experiences are not very well reflected by the media. Many more women work than media-output suggests, very few women are like the 'femme fatales' of soap operas and mini series, and women's desires consist of a lot more than the hearth and home of traditional women's magazines. A call for more realistic images of women might seem self-evident, but is quite problematic. Gender stereotypes for instance do not come out of the blue, but have social counterparts which many might perceive as 'real'. Thus a common negation of the accusation that media distort reality is: 'But many women are mothers and housewives.' Who can define the objective reality media should transmit? Feminists? They are divided among themselves as the previous paragraphs have only minimally illustrated. Women? They can even much less be considered a uniform category. As Brunson (1988: 149) duly argues: 'Thus for feminists to call for more realistic images of women is to engage in the struggle to define what is meant by "realistic", rather than to offer easily available "alternative" images. . . . Arguing for more realistic images is always an argument for the representation of "your" version of reality.'

A related problem of the 'reality reflection thesis' is the implication that media output has unequivocal meanings: they are either real or not real. This denies the complex and multiple meanings of media texts implied by the commercial logic of mass media needing to be popular among a variety of social groups and subcultures (cf. Fiske, 1987). In facing the dilemmas of the reflection thesis, feminist media studies have been profoundly influenced by cultural studies and by its own shift to a constructivist theory of gender. Although not a unified approach with a consistent programme, cultural studies' central tenet of 'communication as a process through which a shared culture is created, modified and transformed' (Carey, 1989: 43), implies a conceptualization of media texts as sites of struggle over meaning (e.g. of gender), rather than as transparent cultural prescriptions. The reality media offer is a product of ongoing negotiation at the level of media institutions, texts and audiences (Gledhill, 1988). As a result media texts are inherently 'polysemic' (Fiske, 1987) and construct diverging and sometimes conflicting articulations of femininity. Although it is often quite clear which articulations of femininity are to be preferred according to media producers (the dominant meaning of the text), the idea of a polysemic nature of media texts undermines the possibility of thinking of audiences as onesidedly and unambiguously affected by media. Which of the many meanings of the texts will they take up? This brings me to the second major problematic of the feminist transmission model of communication: its passive audience conception.

The Audience and 'Us'

In feminist transmission models of communication audiences don't have much choice in interpreting media texts. Either they can accept them as true to reality, in which case they are successfully socialized (liberal feminism), brainwashed (by patriarchy) or lured to the idea that what they see and

read is 'common sense' (socialist feminism). Or they see through the tricks mass media play on them and reject the sexist, patriarchal, capitalist representation of things. It seems clear that many feminists consider themselves among the latter 'enlightened' people raising themselves 'to the lofty pedestal of having seen the light' (Winship, 1987: 140). A deep gap is constructed between 'us' feminists, and 'them' the audience. Objectionable in particular are soap operas, romance novels, and women's magazines which create a 'cult of femininity and heterosexual romance' that – since these media are predominantly consumed by women – set the agenda for the female world (cf. Ferguson, 1983). Such a strong conviction about the value (or rather lack of it) of these media for women's lives, is remarkably similar to the patriarchal attitudes of men knowing what is best for women. Dismissing women's genres for their supposedly questionable content, carries an implicit rejection of the women who enjoy them. That is obviously at odds with the feminist mission to acknowledge and gain respect for women's experiences and viewpoints. Moreover, it does not contribute to our understanding of how contending constructions of gender are articulated in such cultural phenomena. Why, then, are these genres so popular among women? How do women use them to give meaning to their daily experiences? How do 'discourses of femininity' articulated in them interact with other non mediated discourses of femininity such as motherhood and sexuality (cf. Brunson, 1981).

The above questions have activated an unprecedented concern with the female audience, expressed in a boom of mainly ethnographic studies about female recipients of particular genres, soap operas and romance novels leading the field (see Ang and Hermes in this volume). However, the problem of 'us' feminists versus 'them' the audience is not solved by the ethnographic twist in feminist media studies and might in some cases even be intensified as the feminist researcher puts herself in the authoritative position of the all knowing expert of female media pleasures, while in the end still rejecting them as unproductive for 'the' feminist revolution. This is utterly problematic in Radway's by now almost classic study *Reading the Romance*. After respectfully analyzing the romance reading experiences of married working women, she claims that romance reading contains an act of protest against patriarchal culture. Briefly and bluntly summarized: by the social act of reading romance, women signal a time-out for their domestic and caring labour; and by taking up romances in particular with their omnipresent androgynous hero capable of nurturing woman herself, they deny the legitimacy of patriarchal culture in which such men are quite hard to find. Radway now militantly concludes that 'we, who are committed to social change' (my italics), should keep looking for and encouraging these traces of social protest: 'If we do not, we have already conceded the fight and, in the case of the romance at least, admitted the impossibility of creating a world where the vicarious pleasure supplied by its reading would be unnecessary.' (Radway, 1984: 222). In the end the only value of romance reading Radway acknowledges is its potential – however far hidden – for the feminist revolution.

But what to make of those feminists who enjoy soap operas, who revel in harlequin novels and who are addicted to their weekly subscription of their favourite women's magazine, to mention just a few 'bad' genres. Winship

(1987) addressing precisely this question in her analysis of women's magazines confesses that she has been a 'closet reader' of *Cosmopolitan* and *Woman's Own* for years, since a 'true' feminist is not supposed to derive pleasure from such ghastly products. Hers is one of the few examples of a study in which the personal experiences and pleasures of the researchers are an integrated element of the study, thus releasing the tension between 'us' and 'them'. As Skirrow (1986: 115) has argued: 'In investigating popular culture the only way not to feel like a snooping health investigator, sniffing out whether someone's environment is fit to live in, is to examine some aspect or form of it which evokes passionate feeling in oneself.'⁵

Feminism and Cultural Studies

From the points of criticism to feminist transmission models of communication that I laid out in the previous paragraphs, the contours of a 'cultural feminist media studies' project emerge. Though it would be hard to defend the existence of a well-defined theoretical and empirical program, to which a majority of feminist communication scholars adhere, it does seem justified to say that cultural studies approaches are gaining momentum given the growing number of publications in this vein (e.g. Baehr and Dyer, 1987; Brown, 1990; Gamman and Marshment, 1988; Pribram, 1988; Shevelov, 1989).

My own formulation of its theoretical premises would start from Harding's (1986: 17) definition of gender 'as an analytic category within which humans think about and organize their social activity, rather than as a natural consequence of sex-difference, or even merely as a social variable assigned to individual people in different ways from culture to culture'. Such a conceptualization of gender implies that its meaning is never given but varies according to specific cultural and historical settings, and that its meaning is subject to ongoing discursive struggle and negotiation, the outcome having far reaching socio-cultural implications. This struggle over meaning is not a mere pluralistic 'debate' of equal but contending frames of reference. It is circumscribed by existing ethnic and economic power relations, and by the fact that 'in virtually all cultures, whatever is thought of as manly, is more highly valued than whatever is thought of as womanly' (Harding, 1986: 18).

What part do media play in the ongoing social construction of gender? Much depends on their location in economic structures (e.g. commercial versus public media), on their specific characteristic (e.g. print versus broadcast), on the particular genres (e.g. news versus soap opera), on the audiences they appeal to and on the place they occupy in those audiences' daily lives. But obviously all media are among the central sites in which struggle over meaning takes place. Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding-decoding model is a good starting point in case. According to Hall the production structure yields an 'encoded' text which does not constitute a closed ideological system but in which contradictions of the production process are discounted. The thus encoded structure of meaning is brought back into the practices of audiences by their similar but reverse 'decoding' process. Encoding and decoding need not to be symmetrical, i.e. audiences don't need to understand media texts as

producers have intended them. In fact, a certain 'misunderstanding' is likely, because of 'the a-symmetry between the codes of "source" and "receiver" at the moment of transformation in and out of the discursive form. What are called "distortions" or "misunderstandings" arise precisely from *the lack of equivalence* between the two sides of production' (Hall, 1980: 131, original italics). Gledhill's (1988) analysis of meaning production as cultural negotiation at the level of institutions, texts and audiences builds on the encoding/decoding model.

Institutional negotiation results from conflicting frames of reference within media organizations. 'Creative' personnel is guided mainly by professional and aesthetic logic, while managing directors predominantly have economic and ideological interests in mind. D'Acci's (1987) analysis of the American police series *Cagney and Lacey*, featuring two female detectives, illustrates the intricate interplay between institutional and textual negotiations indicative of the complexities and contradictions of the encoding process. Having a female buddy pair at the heart of the series satisfied two institutional needs at once: to revitalize the popular but somewhat stale genre of police series, and to respond to social changes caused by the women's movement. In practice these two claims were not easily realized. A continuous struggle between the writers and the network accompanied the production of the series, the conflicts all boiling down to the question of how to reconcile the treatment of feminist issues with the commercial interest of the network to keep away from controversial topics. The negotiations about an episode in which unmarried career cop Cagney thinks she is pregnant shows how diverging frames of reference enter at the level of script development. The writers did not even consider to let Cagney have an abortion, anticipating that the network would never allow that solution. So a miscarriage was proposed, but the network rejected the story anyway, not wanting 'to shine the spotlight on pregnancy and the problems of an unmarried pregnant woman' (D'Acci, 1987: 219). Obviously, negotiation at this point concerns the ideological implications of the script. The networks countered the writers with a proposal of a story in which Cagney (in her late thirties) has to decide whether she will ever have children. This was unacceptable to the writers for its lack of narrative resolution, the negotiation here being about professional standards of sound scripts. Finally, the contending claims were reconciled by letting Cagney *think* she is pregnant. As becomes clear by the end of the episode, she is not. How her pregnancy could happen and what she means to do about it is hardly discussed in the rest of the episode, since that would involve such politically and socially explosive issues as birth control and abortion. A rather dim narrative remains to which each woman can bring her own experiences with (un)wanted pregnancies and 'career/children' dilemmas. D'Acci's analysis of *Cagney and Lacey* is a rare exception to the tendency within feminist media studies to focus on gender only as explaining particularities of media content.

Negotiations at the level of texts concern the availability of meanings in a text as expressions of the encoding process, and as a result of independent and unpredictable interactions between contending elements in the text. Next to that textual interactions allow audiences to take up different 'subject positions'. To take another analysis of *Cagney and Lacey* as an example: Clark

(1989) argues that the series' narrative form, representational codes and structures of looking empower women and encourage women-identified constructions of meaning. The series combines the linear narrative of the police series – a crime usually related to such feminist issues like sexual harassment, rape, prostitution, etc. is committed and solved – with the more circular structure of the soap opera. Integrated in the linear narrative is the personal life of the heroines which follows a more open and fragmented course. In that narrative the emphasis is on process rather than action, on dialogue rather than solution: 'We don't know from any cause effect structure what Chris [Cagney] will decide about marriage or how MaryBeth [Lacey] will cope with having breast cancer' (Clark, 1990: 119). What we do see are their considerations, their ideas and feelings which are extensively played out, while the outcome of their deliberations (not to marry, what kind of treatment to take) does not get much emphasis. According to Clark representation of the decision-making *process* 'invites the participation of the spectator to complete the process of meaning construction in ways that are meaningful to her' (119).

Textual analysis such as described above, utilizing concepts from psychoanalysis, structuralism and semiotics, has been quite common in film studies (Pribram, 1988) but more and more television texts are being analyzed in a similar vein. For example, Ang (1990) analyzes how the textual construction of Sue Ellen, one of the major female characters of *Dallas*, provides several imaginary subject positions for women: Lewis (1990) and Kaplan (1988) discuss how music videos appeal to a gendered audience; Holland (1987) and van Zoonen (1991) examine the significance of women newsreaders for the ongoing construction of traditional femininity. Older research about romance novels and women's magazines can also be considered part of this body of work (Modleski, 1982; McRobbie, 1982; Winship, 1987).

The concept of polysemic media texts should be embraced with caution, however. In spite of its essential ambiguity, the range of meanings and subject positions a text offers is not infinite. 'Encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate' (Hall, 1980: 135). So most texts do have a 'preferred reading' which, given the economic and ideological location of most media, will tend to reconstruct dominant values of a society – unless we are dealing with alternative media which should also be thought of as polysemic and encoded, within a rather different set of constraints, however. Moreover, meanings in texts need to be activated by real audiences before they can take on any social significance. The negotiation over meaning at the level of audience 'reception' has the most radical potential. 'Reception' implies two related sets of audience practices: use and interpretation.

In Hall's encoding-decoding model three hypothetical positions from which audiences may interpret television texts are identified: the viewer who takes up a *dominant-hegemonic* position reads the texts in terms of its encoding which makes the model symmetrical; the *negotiated positions* entail many more contradictions since the negotiating viewer accepts the global sense of the dominant encoding, but lets her own logic prevail at a more situated level; the most radical reading comes from an *oppositional position* in which the reader/viewer recognizes the text as inflected with dominant codes and recodes it within her own alternative frame of reference. Hall's hypothetical

positions have been empirically validated by Morley's (1980) research on *Nationwide Audience*, a British current affairs program which indeed proved to be subject to a variety of interpretations of the audience. The situation in which audiences actually turn on the television set or pick up a magazine – their social use of media – circumscribe their interpretations. Some examples illustrate this: Bausinger (1984) describes a family in which the man returns home from work and immediately turns on the TV, seemingly to watch the news, but effectively expressing a desire to be left alone. Gray (1987) observes how watching rented videos and discussing soap operas form an important part of the friendship of a group of neighbours: 'These popular texts (. . .) give a focus to an almost separate female culture which they can share together within the constraints of their positions as wives and mothers' (Gray, 1987: 49). Ang and Hermes (in this volume) present a detailed analysis of studies about gender and reception.

The concept of negotiated meaning and the emphasis on reception practices implies acknowledgement of gender construction as a social process in which women and men actively engage. In transmission models of communication women are perceived as victims of dominant culture as expressed in media messages. Supposedly, they are bombarded by disempowering images all but alien to their true selves. The interaction between media and female audiences thus takes on the form of a one-way street. However, people do not only take media as expressions of dominant culture, they also use media to express something about themselves, as women or as men. Being a woman (or a man) implies 'work' since modern society offers so many distinct and sometimes contradicting subject positions (cf. Rakow, 1986). In each social situation an appropriate feminine identity has to be established and expressed. Women can use media to pick up and try out different feminine subject positions at the level of fantasy. But the actual use of media can also be expressive as the glossy existence of expensive 'life style' magazines, read by many not so well off readers, proves. Another illustration comes from Turkle's analysis of the reticence of women to bother about the relatively new social domain of information technologies. She argues that 'women use their rejection of computers (. . .) to assert something about themselves as women . . . It is a way to say that it is not appropriate to have a close relationship with a machine' Turkle (1988: 50). Although many men reject information technologies for exactly the same reason, the attitude of women takes on extra meaning considering the continuous social construction of gender differences.

Feminist Media Politics Reconsidered

The concepts of gender as a social construction and culture as negotiated meaning release feminist media studies from many of the tensions of transmission models of communication. Paralyzing debates about the autonomous gendered contribution of individual female media producers become redundant by giving precedence to the institutional context of media production. The multiple realities of media texts are acknowledged as is the relative autonomy of audiences to accommodate them to their own situation. Women

are taken seriously as active creators of their own daily lives and experiences, instead of being 'medicalized' as helpless victims of dominant culture. By way of conclusion, in true feminist tradition of undermining certainties rather than advancing them, I would like to raise some new problems associated with current theoretical and empirical practices of feminist media studies. Since the field is fully in motion, I can only call attention to them and consider some possible angles from which to approach them. Offering definite and authoritative solutions is beyond my capacity and my conviction that feminism should develop in mutual deliberation, not by the prescriptions of academic 'elites'.

I'll begin with a relatively easy problem of empirical emphasis. In spite of the theoretical recognition that gender construction involves both women and men, we have focused on constructions of femininity in media and genres that are read and appreciated predominantly by women; soap operas, romance novels and women's magazines. Alongside this focus we have limited our attention to implied and actual female audiences of those genres, more often than not drawn from traditional family situations. The knowledge we have accumulated by now, concerns a very particular group of media consumed by a very particular group of women. This is a focus born out of necessity since these are precisely the genres and audiences that have been neglected by mainstream research. An academic community preoccupied with such prestigious issues as new communication technologies, the future of public broadcasting or the effects of political communication, does not come down very easily to the more profane level of media use in the daily lives of 'ordinary women'. But consider the implicit message of our research focus: do we really think *gender* is only constructed in 'women's media'? How about the constructions of masculinity found in sports programmes, war movies, *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, to ventilate just a few stereotypes about men. How do men use those media to construct their gender identity, to express that they are not women? And to cut across the dichotomy of 'women's' and 'men's' media: how do men's 'feminine' activities such as reading a women's magazine or enjoying a soap opera relate to dominant constructions of masculinity?

With some exceptions men and masculinity have managed to remain invisible in media research: 'This has always been its ruse in order to hold on its power. Masculinity tries to stay invisible by passing itself off as normal and universal. (. . .) If masculinity can present itself as normal it automatically makes the feminine seem deviant and different' (Easthope, 1986: 1). Moreover, the focus on the reception of soaps, romances and women's magazines seriously narrows our potential for articulating a comprehensive cultural critique for we tend to ignore whole areas of social and cultural practice: at the level of institutional negotiation, of the production of actual texts there is little research that goes beyond the observation that women work in a male-dominated field: at the level of textual negotiation there are many genres we do not know much about yet, e.g. news and current affairs, quality and popular press, sports, quizzes, etc. New media developments and 'the information society' do attract considerable funding for Research and Development, but have only recently gained feminist attention (e.g. Jansen, 1989, van Zoonen, 1990). I have called the narrow focus of current feminist media studies a relatively easy problem, since its solution involves in theory a 'mere'

incorporation of new fields of attention (transforming mainstream studies seems less likely). In practice, however, given the minimally triple burden of feminist academics (with personal, feminist and academic responsibilities) this might not be an easy task at all.

There is a more fundamental problem to culturalist feminist media studies. As the importance of specific contextual and textual features for the construction of meaning suggests, it seems unlikely that from this field a general theory of gender and media that goes beyond abstract premises will emerge. For our understanding of contemporary cultural processes, fragmented and unpredictable as they are, I suggest this a pro rather than a contra. But the particularist shift in theory and research does raise some disturbing questions about the political nature of feminist media studies, precisely the feature which I suggest determines the exceptional nature of the feminist academic project. If meaning is so dependent on context, can we still pass valid feminist judgements about the political tendencies and implications of texts? For we don't know how audiences will use and interpret texts. A feminist judgement of obvious textual oppression does not need to be shared by other (female) audience groups. If one interpretation is not by definition better or more valid than another, what legitimation do we have to discuss the politics of representation, to try to intervene in dominant culture?

The above problem has been recognized and responded to in several ways: Ang (1985: 135) proposes to consider the fantasies and pleasures involved in watching *Dallas* as independent and relatively isolated dimensions of subjectivity, making daily life enjoyable in expectation of feminist utopias: 'Fiction and fantasy, then function by making life at present pleasurable, or at least liveable, but this does not by any means exclude a radical political activity or consciousness' (Ang, 1985: 136) – a radical activity that applies to the politics of representation in a very limited sense. Ang's argument implies that as feminists we are allowed to produce new fantasies and fictions ourselves, but we should not interfere with the pleasures of the audience, since 'no fixed standards exist for gauging the "progressiveness" of a fantasy' (ibid). Brown (1990) does not follow this reticence to evaluate soap operas and the like. She appreciates 'soap operas, like women's talk or gossip and women's ballads as part of women's culture that exists alongside dominant culture and that insofar as the women who use these cultural forms are conscious of the form's otherness, they are practising feminine discourse'. According to Brown 'feminine discourse' implies acknowledgement of women's subordination often expressed in parodic form by making fun of dominant culture. Feminine discourse thus implies an act of resistance, albeit with cultural tools provided by the dominant order. Brown's appropriation of women's pleasure is useful for it implies a conception of politics that incorporates power relations in the private domestic sphere of media consumption. For example, women's televisual pleasures tend to be ridiculed by other (male) family members and often have to yield to sports and other male favourites. Brown's notion that research can contribute to the legitimation of women's fantasies can thus mean quite a relief in the here and now of daily life. However, Brown's appraisal of feminine discourse borders on simple populism, for how women's 'nomination, valuation and regulation' of their own pleasure relate to the dominant social order remains undiscussed.

The problems of cultural relativism and populism are not privileges of feminist media studies, but haunt each contemporary attempt to formulate a progressive cultural critique. Schudson (1987: 66) discusses the new validation of popular culture in academic research and wonders how to respond to it: 'I end up caught between a belief that the university should be a moral educator, holding up for emulation some values and texts (and not others), and a reluctant admission that defining the basis of moral education is an unfinished often unrecognized task.' Schudson's doubts can be translated almost literally to the dilemmas of a contemporary feminist media critique: where can a feminist media critique derive legitimacy from and how do our academic efforts contribute to feminism's larger political project? If current research has taught us anything, it is that general judgements and strategies are not likely to gain much support or to be successful. The strategical implications of our research are much less self-evident as they were in the case of liberal, radical and socialist feminism. However, I will attempt to conclude with some possibly relevant general considerations and questions.

I suggest a feminist media critique should start from the reception of specific genres in specific social context. To give an example: genre codes and conventions of news produce a relatively closed structure of meanings when compared to soap operas for instance. Considering that news claims an unambiguous relation with reality – a claim many people think justified – we need quite a different set of moral considerations from which to develop evaluations and strategies when analyzing news, which may not be applicable in the case of soap operas. Acknowledging that news too is a social construction, would it still be very inappropriate to expect a decent and ethical representation, of, for example, feminist issues and the women's movement?

Another issue that might be explored is a consequence of the importance given to audience-text relations. Does it not seem logical, now that we are assuming and finding actively interpreting audiences, to develop strategies aimed at the 'semiotic empowerment' of female media recipients? Schudson (1987) makes a similar point when he argues that a task for the universities should be to educate readers in reading critically and playfully. I do not mean anything like making female audiences aware of the 'true' sexist, patriarchal of capitalist meanings of a text. But rather I refer to the pleasures of discovering multiple and sometimes contending constructions in a text, a pleasure that I would gather is not so much different for academics and 'ordinary women'.⁶ Finally, we should not define our sense of 'a larger feminist political project' too narrowly. Our own academic work is still inevitably political, for unfortunately the relation between gender and culture is, as yet, far from being a legitimate and integrated academic concern, with the exception of a few enlightened places.

Notes

1 'Construction' is not a label that Friedan would have used, but the word summarizes her project in the vocabulary of current feminist theory.

2 The reader with a more specific interest in connecting authors and studies to perspectives is referred to Steeves (1987).

3 My discussion of the policies and problems of feminist media is based on knowledge of the Dutch situation but I would be surprised if the gist of this analysis does not apply to other western countries as well.

4 See note 3.

5 I am indebted to Joke Hermes for this passage.

6 At least from my experience in teaching extramural courses about advertisements and soap operas.

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3

Postmodernism and Television

John Fiske

Those who give us brief working definitions of postmodernism (e.g. Hebdige, 1988; Gitlin, 1989) agree on the fuzziness of the term and the difficulty of finding any consensus among its users. In this essay I make no attempt to emulate them, partly because they have done it better than I could, and partly because applying postmodernism to television requires me to be selective, not comprehensive, in my use of its constitutive elements. Television and popular culture have tended to be marginal in most postmodern theory, which has been more concerned to articulate its break with modernism in the 'highbrow' arts, particularly architecture, painting and literature. More recently Deleuze has written extensively on cinema, but of the primary postmodern theorists, only Baudrillard (1983a; 1983b; 1987) has addressed the mass media and popular culture directly, so it is his brand of postmodernism that I shall discuss in this essay. Of course, there have been a number of more general applications of postmodern theory to television (e.g. Connor, 1989; Grossberg, 1987, 1988; Kaplan, 1987; Wollen, 1986; Wyner, 1986) but on the whole television as a cultural medium has not figured centrally in the debates around postmodernism. There are, I believe, good reasons for this. For while contemporary television exhibits many postmodern stylistic features, and postmodern theory can offer us many provocative insights into the textuality of television, there are important schools of television scholarship that provide strong counterarguments. In this chapter, then, I wish to look at those features of postmodernism which offer most potential for the study of television and then to discuss their limitations.

One of the characteristics of 'modernism' (i.e. that which preceded the postmodern) was its belief that understanding social experience was both possible and the proper enterprise of art. Often the aim of this understanding was to produce a 'grand narrative', a coherent theory capable of explaining the multifarious and apparently unrelated facets of experience (e.g. marxism, structuralism or psychoanalysis). Other modernist movements, such as the avant-garde, tried to produce this understanding via the shock value of powerful and contradictory images. In the study of television as discourse,

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