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DISCUSSION PAPER NO. 3

GENDER IMAGES IN POPULAR CULTURE

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ATTENTION: TEACHERS/STUDENTS

This paper is relevant to:

Subject	Area of Study
English	Presentation of an Issue
Media	Audience and Narrative Media Influence Social Values and Media Processes
Contemporary Society	Identifying Social Differences

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What Is Popular Culture ?

Madonna, Batman, Oprah Winfrey, Elle MacPherson, K.D. Lang, The Simpsons, Mel Gibson, Neighbours. Singers, film, models, TV shows and actors: what do each of these have in common? They all belong to that phenomenon called "popular culture". Every time you watch a movie, video clip, television programme, or sports match; everytime you read a magazine, paperback, comic or fashion statement; every time you listen to radio, a rock band or music disc - you are tapping into an aspect of popular culture.

Popular culture consists of all areas of modern entertainment which have a widespread appeal and which belong to the present, although we still can speak about popular culture from past centuries. The novel, for instance, was once considered popular, a part of mass culture.

Popular culture is an essential part of modern living. Its many voices pump out messages and ideas, inviting us to partake of its pleasures and pains. Popular culture brings the world into our living room. It offers stories, music, intimate details of strangers' lives, information on other countries, peoples, religions, lifestyles. It tempts us with cooking, the latest dance craze, fashion items and hair-styles. Popular culture keeps us in touch with the "here and now".

Because popular culture exists very much in the present, it is responsive to change and new ideas. Popular culture deals with contemporary issues, changing beliefs and social and cultural developments such as the changing nature of the family, abortion, sexual preference, equal pay. Many of these issues are discussed in television programmes, magazines and films.

* What are your favourite items or areas of popular culture? Who are your favourite film and television stars? What are your favourite television

programmes? What paperbacks do you read? What do you listen to on the radio? Why? Try to work out reasons for your preferences.

Popular Culture and Youth Culture

Although there are areas of popular culture for all age groups, some (video clips, music, dance and advertisements) are directed specifically to young people. Popular culture can provide guidelines and information on appearance, fashion, fun, values and ideas. For instance, youth culture has forged an unspoken contract with pop-groups and singers. Money will be spent on records, t-shirts, posters of a particular in-group if the singer/group demonstrates it is worthy of such adulation. Fans will also often copy the way the group looks - wear the same clothes, adopt similar mannerisms, hairstyles, speech. Madonna has exerted a tremendous influence over fashion, styles and dance during the last decade. So too have styles such as "punk", "retro", "hip hop", "heavy metal" and "grunge".

How do you account for the influence singers/pop groups have over young people?

The Classical and the Popular Culture

Popular culture has its critics. They argue that popular culture in the forms of popular fiction, films, rock groups, video clips and television programmes are bland, superficial or one-dimensional. Such critics identify a sharp divide between the popular ("low-brow") and the classical ("high" brow). By "classical", or the "high" art tradition, they refer to the great tradition in literature (Shakespeare, Dickens, Austen), art (Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt, Picasso), music (Mozart, Beethoven, Stravinsky) and the whole of opera and ballet.

Recently, however, there are some who have begun to question this position. They claim that the perspective which upholds the "classics" over "the popular" is narrow and elitist and based primarily on aesthetic considerations. In this view, all areas of culture - classical and popular - are of value . They are all "texts" which can create meaning and can be interpreted. The meaning, they argue, is more important than aesthetics.

A "text" should be evaluated on its own merits and in its own genre. All cultural forms should be examined in relation to their own kind or genre. In other words, a film should not be judged in relation to a painting or ballet and found inferior. Rock music should be evaluated in relation to rock music, film to film, opera to opera and so on. They argue that popular culture can be fun, it has value and is certainly not inferior to other forms of culture - it is just different.

Are you familiar with any of the "classics" or examples of high art? What are they? Do you like them? Do you think the classics are "superior" forms of culture? Have you ever been influenced by the classics in the way you see yourself - as a female or male? Why?

Popular Culture - Meaning & Values

Some critics hold that just as we can find examples of great art, opera and drama, we can also find examples of great films, sporting displays, fashion, and rock music. Such critics also argue that we can learn from popular culture, as we learn from classical culture. That all texts - classical and popular - represent the values of the culture in which they are constructed. For instance, just as many of Shakespeare's plays (MacBeth, Hamlet) explore universal themes of ambition, love and death, certain films (Apocalypse Now, Psycho, Gallipoli) also examine universal themes such as war, death and desire.

All forms of popular culture speak certain values and portray ideas. The persona that Madonna has created presents a criticism of sexism and racism while the television programme, Roseanne, sets out to look critically at the values of the traditional white American family. Roseanne Barr also attempts to present a more realistic view of the family: the parents are both overweight, Roseanne is not conventionally beautiful, the children are scruffy and always talk back. In earlier situation comedies, like Father Knows Best and The Brady Bunch, the family tended to be idealised. Teen-movies such as Pretty in Pink, Mermaids and The Year My Voice Broke explore important themes such as the family, love, sex and relationships. The crucial factor is that the individual should understand how to evaluate a text - understand how to examine its structure and values.

What films have you seen recently? What values and ideas did they explore? How did they depict male and female characters?

Why Study Popular Culture?

Although popular culture is constantly changing, exploring new forms and creating new images and fashions, you can nonetheless learn a number of important strategies that will help you evaluate what you are reading, seeing and hearing. You can learn to enjoy popular culture while also adopting a critical perspective. You can learn a number of strategies that will help analyse what you are reading, seeing and hearing. Because popular culture is pervasive and influential, it is crucial that you learn to respond critically to popular texts. There are specific questions that you need to ask about popular texts. Note: you can also apply these questions to classical texts.

A Critical Eye

The following strategies are designed to give you a critical eye. They involve an understanding of how stereotyping works and how the point of view of some people and groups in our culture is constantly distorted and/or omitted. It is crucial that you gain a critical eye so that you can see how popular (and classical) cultural forms may work on you - how they influence the way you think, feel and speak. Remember - you do not have to adopt a passive role in relation to the media. You can approach all areas of the media with an informed, critical attitude. **The important question is not what the media "does to you" - but what you "do with it". You need to know to what extent, the media in its various forms, represents the rights and interests of all groups in our society and how stereotypes of gender roles are reinforced and harnessed through the media. Equality of life is essential to the proper functioning of a democratic society.**

Stereotyping

We evaluate characters in novels, plays and the mass media in terms of how they appear, what they do, how they speak, what they say - we look

at their dress, mannerisms, possessions and so on. Stereotyping is used, at one level, to identify characters. For instance, specific forms of clothing and actions might be used to identify a police officer or doctor. This is different from the stereotyping of personal characteristics, ideas and attitudes. Characters may be presented in complex, detailed ways or they may be depicted in terms of stereotypes. When a character is presented as a stereotype, he or she is given a relatively fixed, unalterable, predictable image. Because stereotyped characters are "fixed" or "rigid" there is little - if any - room to give such figures the real subtleties or complexities of character and behaviour. Stereotypes also frequently draw on prejudices. For instance, throughout history women have been stereotyped as physically weak and irrational, men as strong and rational. Jews have been seen as greedy, Asians as inscrutable, Africans as primitive. Heterosexuals have been stereotyped as normal, homosexuals as unhappy and perverted.

Can you think of any other dominant stereotypes in our culture? What are they?

Gender Stereotyping

One of the most prevalent forms of stereotyping in the media relates to gender. Women have traditionally been stereotyped in terms of their sexuality - romantic heroine, femme fatale or sex siren, single woman, career woman, mother. If you examine each of these stereotypes carefully you will see that the definition of each one is bound up with a woman's sexual status. Men have been stereotyped in relation to their profession or the task at hand - cop, scientist, cowboy, gangster, avenger. Women are defined in relation to the domestic sphere, men to the wider society. When a woman sins against society, her crime is usually sexual - she has used her sexuality to lure the hero to his doom or she has plotted to steal another girl's boyfriend or she is a prostitute. In past decades, the fallen woman was one who had conceived a child outside marriage or who had engaged in an affair with a married man - also sexual crimes. When a man sins, he usually breaks the law - commits a robbery, murder, fraud.

Draw up a list of the films you have seen over the past year. Examine the ways in which the female and male characters were defined, that is, in

relation to sexuality or profession? If both are present within a single character, which is the more important?

Only recently have female actors have been given main roles in genres usually reserved for men - for instance, there have been female leading roles in the road movie (Thelma and Louise), western (Bad Girls), science fiction (the Alien trilogy), police film (Blue Steel), cop film (Silence of the Lambs) and gangster film (Prizzi's Honour). Australian cinema still falls behind in this area. Heroines still tend to play traditionally feminine roles - girlfriend, wife, mother.

Other stereotypes concerning race, age, sexual preference and the able-bodied also exist in the media. **Heroes have almost always been young, white, middle-class, physically able, heterosexual and male.** Only recently has Hollywood attempted to address its own racist history by placing black Americans in leading roles - Posse, The Pelican Brief, Sister Act. In Australian cinema and television - heroes are almost always white, heterosexual and male. **Very few Aborigines, Australians of ethnic background or women have either been given leading and/or unconventional roles. Representatives from other minority groups such as the aged, disabled, gay and lesbian, hardly figure at all.**

Consider a number of soap operas on television such as Neighbours or Melrose Place. Make a list of the possible characteristics characters might possess under the following headings: high/ average intelligence; physically strong/ weak; emotional/ non-emotional; rational/ irrational; extroverted/ introverted; vain/ not-vain; emotionally dependent/ independent; manipulative/open, honest etc. Now, write the names of the characters under the various headings. Do more women than men fit under any of the headings?

Now place characters under various oppositional headings such as: white/black; young/old; heterosexual/gay/lesbian/bisexual; abled/ disabled; European/non-European. Are any of these groups under-represented or not represented at all? If so, why?

Another area of the media subject to intensive stereotyping is that of fashion. Models are almost always young, white, good-looking and - if female - extremely thin. Critics have argued that the stereotype of the painfully slender model has encouraged many young girls to subject themselves to excessive dieting, resulting in anorexia and bulimia. Again the pervasive influence of popular culture.

Stereotyped Actions & Gender

Another important form of stereotyping is through actions. For instance, male characters in film and television dramas are often depicted as winning because they use force, or even violence, to solve problems. Female characters are often depicted as successful because they are beautiful or because they use sex and/or emotional manipulation to achieve their ends.

The action film (James Bond, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Die Hard and Lethal Weapon films) encourages this form of male stereotyping. The characters are experts in physical violence - capable of almost superhuman feats. Female characters tend to alternate between two types: the physically powerful (usually the bad "guys") and the conventionally feminine (usually the heroine).

In some recent films, (the Alien trilogy), female characters are both intelligent, caring and tough. Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), star of the Alien films, is not a simple reversal of the normal female character. She is not just a ball of muscle. She is allowed to be both strong and sensitive. Nonetheless, the Alien films are still fantasies.

What do you think of role reversal, that is, should female viewers be able to identify with physically strong, intelligent female heroes who are superior to the male character? Should male viewers be encouraged to identify with sensitive, physically weak male characters who might be rescued by the female hero?

Point of View

Another way in which the media can use stereotyping is in relation to "point-of-view". Almost all forms of media present their stories from someone's point of view. The newsreader controls point-of-view in the news, the sports commentator in sports programmes. In fiction programmes, point-of-view is usually attached to the main character. We see the events through her/his eyes. Sometimes there is a voice-over, a first-person narration, which also helps to create point of view. Even an advertisement and video clip can tell a story through someone's point-of-view. Singers, of course, present their song from their own point of view.

Whenever you are engaged with the media, you should try to work out who is controlling the point-of-view. If so, explain the context. Documentaries are almost always narrated by a male voice. Why? In the cinema, previews advertising forthcoming films are almost always narrated by a male voice. Why? Would you expect to see a film about equal rights for Aborigines told from the point of view of a white character? Or a film about homosexuality told from a heterosexual point of view? Explain.

Sexual Objects

Women tend to be positioned more as sexual objects in the media. The viewer (male and female) frequently looks at female characters through the desiring look or gaze of a male character. This "look" has been described as "the male gaze". This may explain the unprecedented popularity of a programme like Man O Man in which men are set up as sexual objects. The gender roles, or stereotypes, have been reversed for a change - and many women have found that they really enjoy the opportunity to look at men as sexual objects.

Why use Stereotypes?

Stereotyping is essentially a form of social control. The dominant social group in a particular country partly keeps its position of ascendancy by a variety of methods. One of these is making other groups appear inferior or even by rendering them "invisible" so that they do not appear at all in the various forms of the media.

Women are often depicted as physically weak and intellectually inferior. Men are presented as physically strong and intellectually superior. Black people, the disabled, gays and lesbians and the aged often do not appear at all. When they do, they are sometimes stereotyped to make them seem inferior. In this way the dominant group stigmatises the "other" as incapable of assuming the reins of government and leadership.

How many female characters appear in positions of power (president of a company, pilot of a passenger plane, leading a police raid) in television dramas and other programmes?

Most of our stories, whether in film or literature, are about the quest for perfection, happiness, completeness. The love story is about the desire to find true happiness in the arms of another; religion is about the search for religious perfection; philosophy about the desire to achieve intellectual perfection; law about the search for perfect justice; psychology about the desire to achieve perfect self-understanding and so on. At school, emphasis is usually on achieving top marks. Some psychologists argue that while we yearn for perfection, it is impossible to attain. Happiness depends more on accepting the idea that "no-one is perfect", we are all "human" and capable of making mistakes.

Almost all human activities involve this yearning for perfection which we believe will bring ultimate happiness. Advertising, of course, plays on this need. "Buy this product and you will find happiness" - is the underlying message. Advertisements also frequently direct their messages in a sexist way. Advertisements for household products are directed at female viewers while advertisements for cars and outdoor tools at male viewers.

Examine a number of television and magazines advertisements. What are they really selling?

Conclusion

It is extremely important to watch the media critically. Firstly, you need to work out if characters are being stereotyped - how and why? Secondly, you need to determine for yourself if all groups are being given a voice in the media. Thirdly, you need to understand if your ego ideal, your favourite star, on whom you might model yourself, has been presented in stereotypical masculine and feminine terms. These three basic steps are essential if you wish to develop into a well-informed, aware individual capable of realising your full potential and making a positive contribution to your world.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is your view of images in the media/popular culture?
2. Do you think gender is appropriately portrayed in popular culture?
3. What ways can we become more critical of media as consumers?
4. How can we make the media reflect life and people more realistically?
5. How influenced are you by the media and popular culture?

Biography

Dr Barbara Creed is a Senior lecturer in Cinema Studies at La Trobe University in Melbourne. She teaches and researches in the areas of sexuality, race, age and gender discrimination in the media and popular culture. She is also a well-known feminist film critic.