Niall Richardson & Sadie Wearing: Gender in the Media. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 2014

Rudloff, Maja

Book Review

Maja Rudloff

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Since the early days of women's and gender studies, media, and particularly audio-visual media such as television and film, have played a central role in demonstrating how the representation of gender exerts significant influence over the ideas we hold about femininity and masculinity. Through media, we form imaginations and expectations about what constitutes – or what should constitute – "female" versus "male" and how those two concepts should be interpreted in relation – or in opposition – to each other. A contemporary and increasingly media-saturated world, where new communication patterns and new media genres and formats have emerged along the lines of more traditional audio-visual mediated content, provides a somewhat new and still relatively uncontested field of study with regards to gender representation. This important issue is the subject matter of British scholars Niall Richardson and Sadie Wearing's book *Gender in the Media.* The book is the latest in a series called Key Concerns in Media Studies (Palgrave Macmillan). From an overall perspective the book provides a critical stance on contemporary media representations.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one, Questions of Theory, is a general overview of the main theoretical discussions related specifically to gender and media, mainly film and television, from the second wave of feminist theory up until today. The section is further divided into three chapters on femininity, masculinity and queer theory, respectively. These three chapters mainly cover a review of key ideas and debates that have structured feminist cultural theory and its critical application to the study of media images from the sixties and onwards. The authors' approach to reviewing femininity and masculinity as a

"fixed binary system" (p. 10) is reflected in the division of the first two chapters into femininity and masculinity, the claim being that the study of the two has had very different political implications and outsets. Both chapters examine the impact of objectification, sexual difference, stereotyping and structures of gazing with regards to their different ways of relating to the two genders. In the third chapter on queer theory the authors move "beyond the two-gender discussion" (p. 49) of femininity and masculinity. The focal point of the chapter's theoretical discussion is Judith Butler's influential concept of the performative as key in the denaturalization of seemingly fixed gender identities and its application to an analysis of media images.

Drawing on theories from writers such as John Berger (1972), Judith Butler (1990), Mary Ann Doane (1982), Richard Dyer (1982), Michel Foucault (1977), Laura Mulvey (1975) etc., the epistemology underpinning the book's theoretical discussions and their application on a number of contemporary case studies is clearly poststructuralist. This makes sense in the reading of contemporary "media texts", which is the term used consistently by the authors throughout the book, and which makes the analytical foci and standpoints very clear. For the new student of gender and media, or anyone else interested in gender representation through various mediated forms, it is a short, compact and comprehensive introduction to the main concerns of gendered media representations over the last forty to fifty years. For the more experienced reader of gender and media studies, however, this introductory chapter does not bring much new theoretical debate or discussion to the table and the reader does at times miss the more nuanced insights of a broader spectrum of theoretical debates or angles. However, the theoretical review and discussions are put into good use in the following section, the second part of the book, which contains various different case studies from a contemporary media landscape. In this reader's opinion, this is the most interesting part of the book.

Part two is divided into four media case studies read as contemporary "media texts". The case study analyses evolve around the themes of the four subsequent chapters called Gender and Post-feminist Television Drama, The Make-Over Show, Celebrity Bodies and Lifestyle Magazines, and New Media and 'Performing Gender': Online Dating. These chapters are very up-to-date as they cover a diversity of topics in the exploration of the many different ways in which gender and media intersect in the current media landscape. Particularly the nuanced discussion of post-feminism, which is thoroughly unfolded in the first chapter on television drama and somewhat continued in the following chapters, seems fruitful and relevant. On the backdrop of the much debated and celebrated television series *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Mad Men*, the authors discuss the concept's application as both representational strategy and discursive construction and whether, from a theoretical standpoint, it may be understood as an extension of feminism or as fundamentally hostile to this (p. 64ff). Although there are no conclusive answers, the debate remains relevant in the light of new television series which in recent years have attracted celebration for their more diverse, unconventional, and "realistic" representation

of gender and sexuality. Here the analysis could have benefitted from the inclusion of a broader range of popular TV series, including those in which female protagonists are portrayed in traditionally masculine-connoted roles such as CIA agents (e.g. *Homeland* and *Alias*) and action heroes.

The final chapter of the book moves on to discuss online communities and social media as important sites of identity construction, gender representation and performativity. First of all, this highly pertinent analysis discloses how an analysis of gender in this context differs from traditional media texts because they are authored by the subjects and participants themselves. Secondly, it convincingly shows how new media have, undoubtedly, expanded and altered our everyday confrontation with the experience of mediated gender constructions, and as such it also points to an ongoing, rapidly developing and highly necessary field of future research. Based on the various media case studies in Richardson and Wearing's book, it seems fair to say that although things are slightly changing, mediated representations of gender are generally still characterised by a relatively one-dimensional and dichotomous portrayal of maleness and femaleness (building almost exclusively on a white, patriarchal, and heterosexual norm).

My main reservation about Richardson and Wearing's otherwise compelling book is its rather narrow theoretical inspiration from a western poststructuralist field of research. Upon reading the book, I found it a little striking that a postcolonial and/or non-western perspective on media and gender representation coming from influential authors such as Edward Said or Ella Shohat (amongst others) has been completely omitted. This could easily have been integrated into the theoretical review. It would have added to the discussion concerning questions of power and hegemony, and might also have expanded the insights into the many ways in which media intersect with and help structure everyday perceptions of not only gender but also of other normative and excluding categories such as race and class.

On an even more critical note, one might argue that the lack of "other" perspectives implies that throughout the book the authors maintain a privileged "white" perspective on gender representation in media. The only mentioning of powerful and sociocultural structuring categories other than gender, such as race and class, is made in passing in the first theoretical part of the book and is not consistently implemented in the subsequent case studies of media texts. Consequently, all the media texts examined in the second half of the book only provide examples in which the protagonists are white. Another example of a white perspective is when the authors prove their (important) point of women's underrepresentation in all aspects of the media industry – not only in front of the camera but also behind it – by listing the ratio of women to men employed in powerful positions such as lead actresses/actors, directors etc. A comparison of e.g. black women to white would probably, in this particular case, have shed light on the further implications of adding the issue of race to the problematic ratio of employment in the media industry. Since the authors are making a point of explaining how an important theoretical insight of the second wave of

feminist theory is not referring to women as a coherent group (p. 17), this apparent lack of self-reflection strikes this reviewer slightly odd.

Putting the critique aside, it is, on the other hand, quite clear that Richardson and Wearing have made some deliberate choices in their selection of theories and the book benefits from being short, comprehensive and very readable, which, from a text-book perspective, is a commendable quality. In terms of providing "an idea of what it means to be gendered and to 'do' this gender on a daily basis" (p. 124), which is a key goal of the book, the message does come across very loud and clear. Last, but not least, the book is in itself a convincing argument that the issues of gender in the media have by no means been exhausted, but that they remain exceedingly important in a contemporary and continuously changing mediascape.

Maja Rudloff, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Communication, Business and Information Technologies
Roskilde University, Denmark
mrudloff@ruc.dk