

### 3 Mass culture and gendered culture

In this section we take up a number of issues concerning the place of popular narrative in mass culture.

#### 3.1 Women's culture and men's culture

An apparently anomalous feature of mass culture, often noted by feminists, is the provision of a cultural space designated explicitly as 'women's' – the woman's page in daily newspapers, women's magazines, the woman's film, *Woman's Hour*, etc., while a corresponding category for men hardly exists. There is, for example, no 'man's page' in the daily newspapers, nor 'man's film' amongst Hollywood genres. Feminists argue this is because in western society the norm of what counts as human is provided by the masculine and only women's culture needs to be marked as specifically gendered – much in the same way that 'man' is said to stand for men *and* women, or 'his' incorporates 'hers', etc. The gendering of culture therefore is not straightforwardly visible. The central, established values claim universal status and are taken to be gender-free.

Gender only becomes an issue if women as a specific category are in question, when they become discussible as a deviation from the norm. Feminists, for example, have had to fight a gender-blind academic and critical establishment to get forms such as romance fiction or soap opera on to the agenda as worthy of serious study. Given soap opera's association with the female audience, its relegation to the domain of 'the truly awful' suggests a gendered standard that aligns core cultural values with the masculine, which then needs protection from the feminizing deviations of mass culture. We can observe this unconscious gendering of cultural value at work even in feminist and Marxist analysis. For example, feminist film journalist, Molly Haskell described the Hollywood woman's film as 'emotional porn for frustrated housewives' (Haskell, 1974); Marxist critic David Margolies attacked Mills and Boon romances for encouraging their female readers to 'sink into feeling' (Margolies, 1982/3); Marxist analyst, Michele Mattelart consigns Latin American soap operas to 'the oppressive order of the heart' (Mattelart, 1985). This identification of *feeling* with female cultural forms is perhaps one reason why men often dislike acknowledging their place in the soap opera audience. Clearly the realms of the domestic and of feeling are felt to be beyond serious consideration. We may, then, have to revise some of our assumptions about critical value if we are to get at the heart of the cultural significance of soap opera's popularity.

The questions posed for this book, then, are not only *how is gender constructed in representation?* but *how does gender impact on the cultural forms that do the constructing?* and *on the way they are perceived in our culture?* How, in particular, *does the space designated 'woman's' differ from the masculine norm?*

### 3.2 Images of women vs. real women

Early feminist approaches to the media were concerned with the role of the dominant media images of women in circulating and maintaining established beliefs about the nature of the feminine and the masculine and the proper roles to be played by women and men, wives and husbands, mothers and fathers. They attacked such images for not representing women as they really are or really could or should be – for being stereotypes, rather than positive images, psychologically rounded characters, or real women. In other words, the critique pitted one form of representation against another in terms of their presumed realism: the *stereotype*, because obviously constructed, was assumed to be 'false', while the psychologically rounded character was assumed to guarantee truth to human nature. The problem with this analysis is not the rejection of media distortions, but the supposed remedy. What is required, according to this view, is simply a readjustment of the lens, a refocusing of the programme maker's perspective, in order to produce accurate reflections.

stereotypes

psychologically rounded character

But is it as simple as this? The 'mimetic' assumptions which underlie this view were challenged by Stuart Hall in Chapter 1: we encounter very practical problems in appealing to 'reality' as a means of assessing the constructive work of representations. For the category 'women' does not refer to a homogeneous social grouping in which all women will recognize themselves. For a start, gender intersects with other social identities during the practice of daily life – worker, student, tax-payer, etc. And being 'a woman' will be experienced differently according to one's age, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and so on. The notion that representation can or should reflect 'real women' therefore stalls on the questions:

- whose reality?
- what reality? (the oppression of women? women as victims? positive heroines?)
- according to whom?

In opposition to this mimetic approach, the 'constructionist' view of representation outlined by Stuart Hall implies that even the terms 'man' and 'woman' – whether word or image – which touch on what appears most personal to us – our sex and gender – are in fact cultural signifiers which construct rather than reflect gender definitions, meanings and identities. However 'natural' their reference may seem, these terms are not simply a means of symbolic representation of pre-given male and female 'essences'. The psychologically rounded character, so often appealed to as a kind of gold standard in human representation, is as much a work of construction as the stereotype; it is produced by the discourses of popular psychology, sociology, medicine, education and so on, which, as Sean Nixon suggests in Chapter 5, contribute in their own turn dominant notions of what constitutes feminine and masculine identity. Thus stereotypes and psychologically rounded characters are different kinds of mechanisms by which the protagonists of fiction 'articulate with reality'; the 'stereotype' functioning as a short-hand reference to specific cultural perceptions (as discussed by Stuart Hall in Chapter 4), the

'psychologically rounded character' constructing a more complex illusion from the popular currency of sociological or psychological ideas. Their *cultural significance*, however, cannot be measured in any direct comparison with the real world, but, as we shall see in the following sections, depends on how they are called on within the particular genres or narrative forms which use them, as well as on the circumstances of their production and reception, and on the social context of their audiences.

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