Gender and media studies: progress and challenge in a vibrant research field

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Abstract

Gender and media studies has witnessed in recent years a resounding revival, as is testified by number of published monographs and collections, articles, themed issues of international journals, conferences that bring into focus the diverse features of the relationship between gender and communication. The field has gone through an ebb and flow process over time, since it began to take shape inside the academia in early seventies, under the determining influence of the second-wave feminism, which had made the media a primary object of inquiry and criticism. Actually feminism, its waves and shifts and multiple voices, is a major factor to be considered –alongside equally shiftings conceptual frameworks and methodological tools underpinning research and analysis, and the changing media contexts and contents– in order to account for the constitution and development of the gender and media scholarship.

This paper is aimed at drawing an overview of such a history, through a narrative of change and continuity that strives to render how the field has come to be configured and reconfigured over time, and has readjusted its mode of engagement with the fundamental challenge of disclosing and understanding the gendered and gendering dimensions of the media discourses and practices. More focus will be put on the strands of the vibrant debate that enlivens the current revival, much informed by competing ideas as regards gender and media in a postfeminist and media-saturated cultural environment.

Keywords: gender, media, images of women, feminism, post-feminism

Resumen. *Género y Media Studies: progreso y retos en un campo vibrante de la investigación*

Los estudios de género y los medios de comunicación han sido testigo en los últimos años un renacimiento rotundo como atestiguan varias monografías, colecciones, artículos o ediciones temáticas en revistas internacionales. El campo ha pasado por un proceso de flujo y reflujo a través del tiempo desde que comenzó a tomar forma académica en la década de los setenta. Este artículo tiene como objetivo elaborar un resumen de su evolución histórica a través de una narrativa de cambio y continuidad.

Palabras clave: género, media, la imagen de la mujer, feminismo, post-feminismo

1. An overview of the field

Gender and media studies has witnessed a resounding revival in recent years, as is testified by the wide array of published monographs, articles, themed issues of international journals and conferences that bring into focus the diverse features of the relationship between gender and the media of communication. Gender and media still matters and still calls for dedicated attention and commitment from scholars. Indeed the relationship between the two components of the dyad has perhaps never before been so challenging and complicated – indeed 'tricky', to quote Karen Ross (2010: viii); this becomes apparent in the contemporary scenario, characterised by dramatic change in the media landscape and by redefinition of the boundaries, as well as pluralization, of gender identities. We live as never before in a media-supersaturated world, owing to the growing proliferation and interconnection of technologies and cultural forms of communication. This situation may not necessarily entail per se a generalized intensification of the grasp of the media on our lives – and we should be pretty cautious in drawing such an inference – but it creates the conditions of an expanded media environment in which the power of the media, essentially the *symbolic power* of defining and constructing reality, "of imposing the vision of legitimate divisions" (Bourdieu, 1989:22) today finds extensive scope and unprecedented wide variety of sites of production and diffusion.

We are concerned precisely with this power when we interrogate and investigate the gendered and gendering dimensions of the media – as discourses, institutions, technologies and so on – in order to grasp and understand the role they play, *always at the intersection with other social and cultural factors*, in influencing processes of gender identity formation and development. And since both the notion and the lived experience of gender identity are today in a state of flux, and the male/female dichotomy (whether predicated upon traditional essentialist positions or on theories of the social construction of male/female differences) has been transcended by a broader spectrum of gender identities, it becomes evident that the intellectual challenge of doing gender and media scholarship is more stimulating, demanding and 'tricky' than ever. This challenge calls into play the theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches and interpretative strategies that we embrace as scholars and researchers in undertaking such an intellectual endeavour: in other words *how we do* gender and media studies.

I can obviously see the crucial importance to focus on this issue from the perspective of the current state of the art, of which I have only just sketched-out the complex and intriguing picture. I intend however to do this only in the second part of the article, after providing a brief and selective reconstruction of the history of gender and media studies. As is widely known, this field of scholarship began to take shape in the early 1970s and has evolved at different

paces in more than 40 years of existence. I have spoken of a fairly recent revival. But regardless of ebbs and flows or waves of evolution, gender and media studies has witnessed – not surprisingly – turning points and shifts in the conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches underpinning research and analysis. Those steps and moves are worth recalling, as retracing our intellectual genealogies may help to fight historic amnesia of previous fallacies, while on the other hand it provides the opportunity to rely and "build on previous insights" (Van Zoonen, 2011: 4). Media studies today is all too often flawed by lack of historical perspective – which may be cause for repetition and redundancy in research (Carlsson, 2007; Corner, 2013) - and younger researchers are not always aware of how their field of studies has been configured and reconfigured in the long duration.

I have mentioned a selective reconstruction and am therefore required to declare my criteria for selection. I must first say that I use the term 'gender and media' as an extended synecdoche (the whole that represents the part) whereas in fact I am referring mainly to *feminist media studies* and, still more specifically to the field of studies known as *feminist television criticism* (Brunsdon and Spigel, 1997, 2008*; Lotz, 2001; McCabe and Akass, 2006), which focuses on diverse articulations of the relationship between women and television. In no way is this choice premised on the misconception of the plurality of genders and the 'manifoldness' of the media (Couldry, 2012), or on the implicit assumption that 'gender' is merely a synonym for 'women'; nor does this choice advance the claim that all research on gender or media can, or must, be subsumed under the feminist banner. As Dow and Condit have stated explicitly: "The moniker of 'feminist' is reserved for research that studies communication theories and practice from a perspective that ultimately is oriented toward the achievement of 'gender justice'" (2005: 445). Thus feminist-inspired media scholarship is concerned with gender justice and equality; it aims to foster *change* in accordance with the *will to change* (Hooks, 2004)*,* which is a constant of feminism even in the heterogeneous and changing theoretical positions and political practices that have shaped the successive waves of the movement over time.

In any case feminist-inspired scholarship, even if it does not cover the whole field of gender and media studies (especially since a branch of scholarship on masculinity and later on various sexual minorities was established openly in the 1990s) has generated the largest body of research on the construction of femininity in the media, putting a major (albeit not exclusive) focus on television as the medium with the prime position in the media system. Although this primacy has been challenged in recent years by the impact of digitalisation and convergence, the continuing importance of television is undisputed. Despite numerous announcements of its imminent death, television is in no way an old medium: it remains for most people their main source of information and entertainment, *their main definer of reality*, regardless of how and where is made available and watched. There should be no one more aware of the risk and error in the dichotomy between old and new media (an idea enthusiastically embraced by a good many present-day media studies scholars)

than those who engage in gender theories and who are thus conscious that the thinking behind any dichotomy - as male/female - is fallacious.

Feminist media studies has the peculiar characteristic of having taken origins and stimulus *outside* academia, in the activist circles of second-wave feminism. In placing the formative stage of this criticism between mid-1970s and mid-1980s, Charlotte Brunsdon – a key figure of feminist television criticism in Europe – emphasises "the move from outside to inside the academy" (1997: 189); this move changed the figure of the 'feminist activist' into the 'feminist intellectual' holding an academic position. It was a consequential move, in that it favoured the creation – within media studies, at that time still under the banner of mass communication research – of a space (if only a marginal one, in accordance with the inequality regime of academia) where the voices of women concerned with, and about, the way women were treated by the media could be expressed and listened to: it might be said that this was one of the first achievements of the *will to change* that the movement infused into scholarship, even if this change concerned a restricted and somewhat privileged circle and not the 'ordinary women', whose 'images' portrayed in the print and especially the electronic media were persistently sought out by the female activists and intellectuals in the early phase of feminist media studies.

The story of feminist television criticism starts with the 'images of women' research trend, and that is also how I shall start my overview. But since the feminist discourse permits and indeed encourages recourse to autobiography (a recourse rejected by other modes of thinking and scholarship as an obstacle to scientific objectivity) I must add a further motive for my choosing to focus on feminist-inspired media and television criticism. The story of this field or sub-field is in many respects *my own* story. I was a feminist who later became an academic and have dedicated most of my research, begun precisely in the formative phase of feminist media studies, to investigating the discursive construction of gender identity (specifically female) in television.

2. Images of women

The feminist thinker Cynthia Enloe (2004) has brilliantly reconverted a common stereotype of femininity – curiosity – into a resource for production of knowledge, coining the expression 'the curious feminist' to denote an inquiry-based approach that aims to unveil and unpack structures of power, starting with the fundamental question 'Where are the women?' This, as it happens, was the precise key-question, well before Enloe thought-up her original idea, that was raised by the first feminist researches into women and the mass media.

'Where are the women in [public] television? In front of the television set' In the 1970s and the early 1980s, when the issue of women's representation in the media was the main concern of academic and extra-academic research and was prominent also in the political and cultural debate raised by the feminist movement, recourse was had to the ironic aphorism coined by Muriel Cantor

(1978) in order to deplore the fact that women were much more often the viewers of TV than its protagonists. No aphorism coincides with the truth; it either exceeds it or falls short of it, as Karl Kraus teaches us; and although the quantitative research methodologies that predominated at the time seemed to support them, assertions of that type inevitably reflected to a greater or lesser extent the position that Angela McRobbie was later (1997) to define as feminism's 'angry repudiation' of the media.

In this first phase, which coincided with the emergence of second-wave feminism, research on women and the media was conducted mainly by having recourse to methodologies of content analysis, with the main objective of discerning and criticising the sexual stereotypes conveyed by television, the press and advertising. Variously referred to as 'images of women paradigm' or the 'sex roles approach', this trend in research came into existence in spheres of feminist activism and was consequently imbued with the strong criticism directed by the women's movement at the media, which they had marked out as a major target for a polemic attack. Betty Friedan's very influential book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which is widely credited for sparking off second-wave feminism, accused the media (in particular the women's magazines) of reproducing a sexist ideology that was provoking growing unhappiness among American women, trapped in their domestic roles as dedicated mothers and subordinate wives.

There may not have been precisely 'angry repudiation', but there is no doubt that a great deal of suspiciousness and mistrust towards the media permeated academic research. An example of a landmark work of that time (which is even today an essential point of reference for any historical overview of gender and media studies) is the collection *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media,* in which the sociologist Gaye Tuchman formulated the thesis of the 'symbolic annihilation of women' (Tuchman, 1978: 3-38). In introducing the outcomes of a series of researches on sexual stereotypes, Tuchman drew on the theories of George Gerbner to maintain – with specific reference to television – that by putting into practice systematic policies of under-representation and misrepresentation, the mass media had reached the point of denying or degrading the very social existence of women. In the 'fictional world' created by symbolic portrayals in the media, women turned out to be grossly under-represented; they were almost excluded from the sphere of work outside the home, yet did not escape the roles of wife and mother. Furthermore women were portrayed as weak and vulnerable, the helpless victims of masculine violence, and in general they seemed to be dependent or submissive in their relationships with men. Absent, marginalised, trivialised, victimized: in short, '*symbolically annihilated*'. According to the researchers, those images reflected the dominant ideas concerning gender and power relationships between the sexes (the reflection hypothesis), but did not do justice to the true condition and the aspirations of modern women. "Television images of women in large measure are false," proclaimed the conclusions of the volume, "portraying them less as they really are, more as some might want them to be" (Tuchman, Kaplan, Benét, 1978: 273).

The 'sex role approach' was destined to fall into disuse in subsequent decades, although its presence continued to hover in the persistent cliché that research on gender and the media should remain firmly anchored to the discourse of sexual stereotypes and the dualism of positive and negative images. The progressive abandonment of this approach obviously does not mean that gender stereotypes (both old and new) no longer exist or persist to this day, nor does it negate the importance of unveiling and unpacking them and finding the means of making them – to quote Stuart Hall – 'uninhabitable' (in Lotz, 2006: 12). The reasons for the decisive shift, from the 1980s onwards, of feminist media studies towards other approaches were however numerous and well grounded.

Inspired by the paradigm of 'communication research', the analysis of sexual stereotypes moved from assumptions and came to conclusions that have been the object of serious criticism and revision: the assumption of full transparency as well as univocality of media's images; and the conclusion that these images were immediately assumed as models of behaviour ('role model framework': Lotz, 2006) on the part of vulnerable and inactive female viewers. Merri Lisa Johnson describes this as "the media culture as a threatening man and the female spectator as vulnerable maiden", in her pungent synthesis (2007: 14). The most compelling criticism was directed at the epistemological fallacy of the merely mirror-like and mimetic understanding of media portrayals that underpinned the approach of the images of women; from there originated the deliberate imputation that the media were spreading unreal and distorted images of women. 'Distortion' was a key concept of that research approach; and the accusation that the media were misrepresenting the true situation of women in turn disclosed the claim, on the part of academics and feminists, that they possessed the authentic and legitimate version of the true situation of women and wished to impose it. "Arguing for more realistic images is always an argument for the representation of 'your' version of reality" (Brunsdon, 1997: 28). In fact what emanated from these researches was a high level of self-confidence on the part of feminist authors, who assigned to themselves the duty of raising the consciousness of ordinary women, the unconscious dupes of media sexism. Tuchman spoke for many in closing her chapter on the symbolic annihilation with the question "How can we free women from the tyranny of media messages limiting their lives to hearth and home?" (1978: 38).

In expressing its own will to change, the emerging scholarship on gender and media did not avoid the tension and, in its true sense, the opposition between feminism and femininity: between the liberating mission of the former and the unwitting subjection of the latter to dominant patriarchal ideology. This tension opened up a contradiction in feminist criticism of media, since it seemed paradoxically to incorporate the same vision of women as victims, which cultural critics blamed in researches on sex roles: a further reason for wanting to explore new approaches. And we must finally acknowledge, as Rosalind Gill has remarked (2007a: 14) the saturation effect provoked by the accumulation of a body of work that, in confining itself to intercepting and

analysing sexual stereotypes, failed to enquire into other aspects of the relationship between gender and media. This repeated 'discovery' of sexism in the media ran the risk in the longer term of becoming more tedious than enlightening.

The quantitative methodologies, the restricted range of objects of study, the implicit adhesion to a transmission view of communication that took no account of audience agency, the undeniable prejudice towards the media: all these make the 'images of women' approach seems inexorably dated. Nevertheless we must acknowledge that the approach played a fundamental role in the formative phase of feminist media scholarship; its very limits helped to orientate gender and media research towards more sophisticated conceptual frameworks and to expand avenues of research and deploy more subtle interpretative strategies. Furthermore, even though the 'images of women' paradigm may no longer constitute a valid theoretical and methodological point of reference for present-day gender and media studies, it testifies to a pioneer phase of feminist scholarship in which the production of knowledge was envisaged as a premise of action for change toward more gender justice in media and society. This is probably a testimonial that still preserves its value as an exemplar.

3. The paradigm shift

A characteristic (and a strong point) of feminist media studies is the particularly permeable nature of a field that has taken shape and developed at the intersection with numerous other fields and disciplines, each of which has contributed to the orientation and reorientation of theoretical frameworks and the choice of objects and methods of study. Although mass communication research was the prevailing disciplinary context of the foundational phase of feminist media studies, gender and media research soon found space in the agenda of other disciplines; and the progressive academic institutionalisation of the field exposed it to intellectual influences that over the years have penetrated most of the areas of scholarship with which it has intersected: media studies, obviously, but also film studies, semiotics, sociology, cultural studies, women and gender studies and more so. The feminist perspectives and concerns of the young (at that time) field of scholarship have in turn exercised influence on more established branches of study; this happened especially in television studies, which have benefited from the refreshing and groundbreaking contribution of feminist criticism in two key areas of research, namely television genres and audiences. The engagement with genres and audiences marked a significant and consequential paradigm shift in the formative phase of feminist television criticism, which culminated in the course of the 1980s. Like any process of historical evolution, the development of feminist television criticism does not fall into a succession of self-contained decades; the prerequisites for the shift that I have referred to, for example, were already in place in the late 1970s, in the full bloom of the 'images of women' approach.

The realist paradigm informing this approach had provoked criticism within feminism itself; the rise to prominence in the 1980s of an influential school of social constructivism within social theory helped to dismantle the assumption that media representation should reflect reality. Media do not mirror, instead they construct reality, and "they are involved in actively producing gender" (Gill 2007a: 13). At the end of the 1980s the Italian theorist Theresa de Lauretis (1987) was to propose the definition of the media as 'technologies of gender'. The content analysis, so much ingrained in a deterministic vision of the influence of media messages, had for its part been undermined owing to the qualitative analyses that were carried out under the banner of film studies and cultural studies; those in-depth textual analyses were not concerned with images and stereotypes but sought to throw light on wider and deeper structures of meanings, which did not lend themselves well to univocal interpretations and automatic inferences concerning impact on viewers.

During the same period, media studies were abandoning traditional research on effects in favour of a resolute turn to audiences – the so-called ethnographic turn or new audience research – to which British cultural studies made a decisive contribution. Stuart Hall's famous essay 'Encoding/decoding' (1980) proved to be hugely influential in generating an important trend in reception theory and research that posited the semiotic openness of media texts for plural audience readings and responses - from dominant to negotiated to oppositional - according to the different socio-cultural positioning of viewers and the different contextual resources which frame making sense of television. Hall's communicative model (in particular certain interpretations that went too far in confirming the subversive potential of audience responses) has subsequently aroused criticism (see Livingstone, 2007); but reception theory initiated an exciting phase of research informed by the new paradigm of the active and interpretative audience.

Against this background of shifting paradigms should be placed the works of those feminist scholars (for example Ien Ang 1985; Dorothy Hobson 1982; Michèle Mattelart, 1982 and 1986; Tania Modleski, 1982; Ellen Seiter, 1989) who have favoured the emergence and enhancement of objects of study and research that were previously neglected: in particular the traditionally feminine genres and more especially serial narratives such as soap operas, along with female viewers who were freed from the stigma of 'cultural dopes' and regarded as subjects actively engaged in the negotiation of the meanings and pleasures offered by media texts.

Feminist engagement with the soap opera did not happen without ambivalences. Although second-wave feminism's "general framework of hostility to media stereotyping" (Brunsdon, 2000: 52) was by now somewhat toned down, soap opera still remained the televisual genre that was mainly linked, on account of its content and the profile of its viewers, to the female figure that along with advertisers' woman-as-an-object was the feminists' prime polemical target: the housewife. Admittedly, the soap opera was the only kind of programme in which women were not under-represented, indeed they accounted for the majority of characters; but this feature, which had clearly emer-

ged from previous content analysis, helped to intensify contempt for daytime serials that were stigmatized as *feminine ghetto*.

In any case, the choice of the soap opera as a new object of study for feminist scholars was influenced by growing interest in exploring a genre "that was perceived to be both for and about women" (Brunsdon, 2000: 29), and by the wish to capture and understand the nature of the pleasure that female viewers derived from watching them. Accordingly, this shift in feminist television criticism is also referred to as a 'turn to pleasure' (Gill, 2007a: 13).

On the other hand, the focus on soap opera and on pleasures and the identifications experienced by a female viewership entailed challenging established cultural hierarchies in academy; feminist scholars were thus expressing a criticism of the gendered agenda of media and television studies, which in setting up a hierarchy of relevant and legitimate objects of study had up till then failed to give serious consideration to a cultural form that was aimed at women. Research into soap opera audiences was equally situated at the intersection of a twofold intent: to gain fundamental insights into consumption and reception of a genre that was so central to women's everyday life, and to turn marginalised social categories into key-objects of study. The critical readings carried out by feminist scholars speculated on a hypothetical figure of the female viewer, inferred from textual constructs; but it was necessary to interrogate real women to achieve an understanding, not merely a theoretical one, of how they made sense of television. And for its part researching the empirical female viewer was a way of giving voice to ordinary women and conferring visibility and value on the personal narratives, hitherto not listened to, of their experience as viewers.

Studies of soap opera and audience research have offered opportunities for encounters and a rapprochement between two figures – the feminist intellectual and the female viewer – who were poles apart in many feminist writings. This relationship was, and remains, ambiguous and contradictory in its oscillation and sometimes entanglement between identification and dis-identification. But the shift in the 1980s was significant, not least because it taught feminist media scholars to regard with more sympathy and respect (without abdicating but at the same time problematizing their own critical stance: Brunsdon, 1997: 43) both the ordinary women and the much-denigrated cultural forms that addressed and pleased them.

4. Does television empower women?

For once I am going to renounce my intention to limit my references to the field of feminist media studies and will instead recall the thinking of an author, Joshua Meyrowitz, who is certainly not in this field but who in the 1980s drew up a general interpretative model on the influence of electronic media on the lives of women. In the context of a work that soon became a classic (*No Sense of Place,* 1985) and was rooted in the intellectual tradition that

falls under the heading of 'Medium Theory', Joshua Meyrowitz identified in the new 'patterns of access to information' created by the electronic media a key factor in raising the feminist consciousness and contributing to the breaking up of the rigid dualism of sex roles.

In the course of history, Meyrowitz pointed out, the social strategy aimed at naturalising the inferior status and subordination of women was brought about by, amongst other things, the institution and maintenance of distinct and separate spheres of presence, action and information for males and females. Assigned to the private sphere in her house, a symbol and a place of physical containment, excluded from participation in social arenas and from access to the fields of knowledge that were reserved for men, a woman would lead her own life and develop her own subjectivity in a situation of relative isolation and experiential separateness from the opposite sex. Such isolation, in turn, constituted not only the consequence of a socially-determined mode in which femininity was constructed, but an essential device for this very construct.

The advent of electronic media, and more especially the advent of television, radically changed this state of affairs. Television is perhaps the main creator of that 'delocalisation of social life' that is recognised as one of the distinctive characteristics of modernity; the physical location no longer circumscribes the range of knowledge and experience, now enormously broadened by the capacity of electronic media to overcome spatial barriers. Television creates informative systems or models for access to information that break up and neutralize the structures of isolation and greatly help to erode the significance and extent of domestic segregation – with all its cultural and behavioural associations – by which in the past the social construct of femininity and the separation of sexual spheres was sustained. In this way, Meyrowitz concluded, television triggered processes of merging female and male identities, driving them towards a 'middle region' that combined aspects of both genders in a sort of 'situational androgyny'.

No automatically progressive vision of communication technology is intrinsic to this theory of the media's impact on the lives of women. Meyrowitz emphasised the need to take account of several causal factors and the validity of his observations was to be understood as being confined to the first televisual generation, to the young and very young women who in the 1950s happened to be the first to experience the irruption of the new medium into the concrete and symbolic spaces of their daily life.

I wanted to recall this theory, which feminist authors such as Lynn Spigel (1992) have contested, because of the daring originality with which Meyrowitz subverted (against the received feminist opinion at that time) the role of television in relation to the crucial problem of changes in conceiving and experiencing femininity. His sophisticated analysis in fact leads us to acknowledge television, in given conditions and circumstances, as an innovative force, helping to integrate women into male-dominated social arenas. In present-day parlance we could say 'a resource for feminine empowerment'.

Furthermore, Meyrowitz accredited to television the then incipient process of blurring the boundaries between female and male identity, thus indicating the fluid and flexible character of gender: a view that was soon to be theorised from a far more radical perspective (I am thinking of Judith Butler 's *Gender trouble*, 1990) becoming in turn part of present-day received opinion, feminist or other, in matter of gender. It is perhaps no surprise that the interpretative model advanced by Meyrowitz should have had little impact on feminist media studies in the 1980s, which were cautiously renouncing their hostility (not their critical attitude, and for good reason) towards the media and popular culture in general, and were just beginning to acknowledge media texts as resources for the imagination, capable of offering female audiences the pleasure of cultivating fantasies of empowerment and exploring modes of femininity that could not otherwise be enjoyed in real life. But the emphasis, consistent with the advent of new audience research in media studies, was on the viewers' interpretation and not at all on television; researchers were discovering that audiences created their own meanings resisting or negotiating the power of television texts to shape sensemaking processes. What is more, Meyrowitz himself went along with the traditional and sexist character of many television discourses, if only to reassert that the specific contents could be less important and influential than the breakdown of gender segregation in access to information. His insistence on structural and contextual factors, without wishing to undermine the importance of the textual elements, was a warning against the claim (never entirely abandoned) that one could infer the effects of television simply from its content: not merely because television is a complex entity, which operates at different levels and speaks, as it were, with many voices, not necessarily consistent with one another – this is why it can be simultaneously, but on different levels, emancipatory and male chauvinist – but because the content itself can conceal ambivalent or ambiguous meanings and constitute a site of struggle between different ideological and cultural positions. Meyrowitz thus puts forward a conception of television as a multi-faced and potentially contradictory medium, at the same time liberating and sexist as far as gender politics are concerned. Twenty years after its elaboration, this conception preserves intact its capacity to introduce us to a more articulated and complex understanding of television, suggesting modes of investigation and analysis and interpretative keys that take into account the multi-layered and multivocal nature of the media, whenever we engage in exploring the forms and manifestations of their power to define reality. Thus Meyrowitz's theory preserves the appeal of an intellectual challenge to the widespread and persistent tendency to 'put the blame on TV'.

Recently Elihu Katz, one of the founding fathers of communication studies, revisited and subsequently worked on Meyrowitz's theory, basing on it a positive response to the question 'Does television empower women?' (Howard-Williams and Katz, 2013). Katz has declared that he was driven by the intent "to challenge the common tendency of ascribing to it [television] only negative outcomes" (19). I shall take up these suggestions in the concluding section of this article.

5. Assessing the state of the art

In the introduction to one of her last books, the English scholar Karen Ross relates that when she announced in a conversation with a few colleagues that she had just finished a book on gender and the media, their response was 'What? Another one?' (Ross, 2010: VII). Ross observes, rightly, that no-one would make such a comment concerning studies of the internet or war or politics; yet when the issue of gender and media literature comes up even in the academic circles, there seems to be a perception that there is an oversupply, indeed an unnecessary accumulation of works in a field of enquiry that some people, despite their polite expressions of interest, tend to regard – in their more or less conscious adherence to a post-feminist perspective – as rather old-fashioned.

The episode referred to by Ross is hardly an isolated case. Working in the fields of feminist media studies and feminist television criticism has entailed, and still entails, the probability of encountering reactions on the lines of 'What? Another one?' – as if those matters with which we are concerned were dusty and outmoded, fit only to be consigned to the attic or indeed to the archaeology of a feminism of yesteryear or the languishing margins of niche studies. Instead the abundant flowering of gender and media studies in the international academia of the new century testifies to the vitality of this branch of scholarship, which is engaged in the ongoing task of mapping, analysing and understanding the manifold gendered forms of media production, portrayals and reception.

Nevertheless it is true that after the major paradigm shift that occurred in the 1980s, generating a steady flow of innovative research and publications, the history of scholarship seemed to go through a phase of relative stasis. Liesbet Van Zoonen locates the pause in the evolution of feminist media studies in the mid-1990s and attributes it to the complex of institutional and technological transformations that fuelled the idea of a clear demarcation between old media e new media. The irresistible attraction of the new, instigated also by the growing channelling of funds for research towards projects relating to digital technology, soon came to eclipse the old electronic and printed media. What is more, said Van Zoonen ironically, "Didn't we know all there was to know about these old media already? What more could be found about the stereotypes of women in advertising?" (Van Zoonen, 2011: 3).

In truth we certainly did not know (and we still do not know) all there is to know about the increasing complexity of the relationship between gender and media in times when old and new intersect, converge and merge. But although the growth of feminist media studies seemed to slow down in the 1990s, this temporary phase was not without its achievements: it allowed scholarship to reap the fruits of the previous innovative season and to assess and to reflect upon the state of the art of scholarship. Several important works on expertly-researched topics were published in those years, including (but not limited to) the landmark books by Ann Grey on gendered video technology (1992); the groundbreaking research by Julie d'Acci (1994) on the pioneering series

Cagney and Lacey; the wide-ranging study by Bonnie J. Dow (1996) on feminism making its way into prime-time television programming. But what particularly characterised the literature of the 1990s was the works, whether in the form of the monograph or a collection, that offered extensive overviews of the field of feminist media studies. Worth mentioning in this connection are Liesbet Van Zoonen's broad-ranging critical introduction to *Feminist Media Studies* (1994); the *Reader in Women and Media,* edited by Helen Baehr and Ann Gray (1996); and the first edition of *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, edited by Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie d'Acci and Lynn Spigel (1997).

Insofar as they set out to restore a representative picture of their area of scholarship, these works emphasised the level of maturity and sophistication and the critical and reflexive capacities developed by feminist media studies in two decades of history. The range of objects studied, from representations to texts, audiences, reception contexts and production practices; the diversification of theoretical and methodological perspectives, thanks to fruitful interdisciplinary intersections (with semiotics, film studies, cultural studies, post-modernism, post-colonialism, social constructivism and more still ....); the important move towards the acknowledgement of class-race-culture-inflected differences among women; the engagement with ideas of gender identity as flexible and dynamic, and of meanings as sites of struggle and negotiations: whether they were single-authored monographs or multivocal collections, the state-of-the-art reviews that appeared in the 1990s displayed evidence of the expansion and deepening of the now firmly established field of feminist media studies, which also allowed for more complex accounts and understanding of how gender was addressed and articulated in the media. The notion of post-feminism, which was due to become the predominant issue in the feminist debate and in popular culture in general in the 2000s, also made a first appearance (Probyn, 1997) in *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*.

6. Feminist media studies in the post-feminist era

Nowadays television and feminism find themselves associated in conventional wisdom – which may sometimes subtly percolate into academia – by a common belief: i.e. that the one and the other are now both regarded as outmoded and *passé*. Narratives of death that take their demise for granted are produced and widely circulated.

As for television, we can clearly see at work the enduring 'substitution approach' that so often prevails in discussions about the media and their evolution. By 'substitution approach' I refer to the intellectual penchant of accounting for processes of change and development in terms of displacement of the 'old' by the 'new': the new, in this case, being obviously the internet and in general the digitisation affecting the whole media environment. Consistently with the verdict of demise, the present stage of television history has been conceptualized and is typically defined as *post-broadcast*: television has been granted the prefix *post*. Is television really gone? In a sense, we could say that

television has never been so healthy and triumphant as it is today: it has entered an age of 'plenty' (Ellis, 2000), characterised by an unceasing proliferation of channels, an uncontainable spread of output across media, screens, platforms and national and transnational phenomena of immersive and addictive fandom that was unthinkable in the old days of the medium. But on the other hand it may be said that owing precisely to the transformation undergone by the medium in the digital age, television is no longer what it used to be. Predictions and announcements of death have been a regular feature of the history of almost all the technologies and cultural forms of modernity - novel, film, radio, press, painting, photography etc. – and have proved to be systematically unfounded. But we should be wary of dismissing those announcements, since they reveal underlying essentialist conceptions that tend to harden the nature of whatever is at issue into a set of given and unchanging characteristics: essentialist visions that resist coming to terms with processes of change and becoming.

Things are no different for feminism. Its alleged 'pastness' is claimed by many, both in intellectual circles and in popular culture; and the word has in turn acquired the prefix *post,* attesting that we live now in a *post-feminist* era. Admittedly, post-feminism is a highly contradictory and disputed notion, as is apparent from the burgeoning debate that has resounded over the last two decades in the vast array of writings dedicated to feminist media studies. I do not intend to embroil myself in the intricacies of this heated debate, to which numerous feminist scholars (Boyle, 2008; Brooks, 1997; Budgeon, 2011; Genz and Brabon, 2009; Gill, 2007a and 2007b; Hollows and Moseley, 2006; Lotz, 2001; McRobbie, 2009; Press, 2011; Tasker and Negra, 2007) have contributed, supplying – from different standpoints - diverse and competing versions and interpretations of post-feminism. I shall confine myself to a brief overview, starting from the unquestioned acknowledgment (see Gill, 2007a; Boyle, 2008; Budgeon, 2011; Thornham and Weissmann, 2013) that the term 'post-feminism' entered public discourse some time ago "as shorthand for the death of feminism" (Budgeon, 2011: 27). Two opposing grounds are cited for the validation of this claim: the success of feminism – gender equality is now a *fait accompli* – or its failure: gender equality has proved to be an unattainable utopia – but in either case feminism is constructed as outmoded and outdated. In a word, it is *history* (Thornham and Weissmann, 2013). The term 'post-feminist' may also encompass an oppositional stance and be associated with rejection of second-wave feminism (Paglia, 1993; Wolf, 1994), or even backlash against it (Faludi, 1992).

In academic circles post-feminism may conceal ulterior connotations. Some feminist theorists (Brooks, 1007; Lotz, 2001) see it as a historical shift, a revitalising development triggered by the encounter with other 'posts' – post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-modernism – that has oriented feminist thinking and practice towards a new engagement with issues of differences between women. "Post-feminism ….is about the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to debates around difference" (Brooks, 1997: 4). Post-feminism in this sense offers a new analytical perspective that stresses the intersection between gender and "other forms of marginalization

and other axes of power" (Gill, 2007a: 250) along lines of class, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality, thus displacing the once-accepted idea of a commonality of women's experiences. As Braithwaite (2002: 341) highlights, "the breadth of feminist issues is now much broader than ever before".

Gill and Budgeon are for their part the proponents of definitions of post-feminism that do not coincide either with the demise or rejection of feminism or with an analytical perspective focused on difference; they rather conceive post-feminism as a set of distinctive features of contemporary culture. Gill speaks about a "post-feminist *sensibility*" (Gill, 2007b) that informs media culture and should therefore constitute the *critical object* of feminist media studies. Budgeon has recourse to the concept of a '*constellation*' (2011: 37) to describe the historically specific combination of factors that make up the post-feminist context to which contemporary feminist scholarship has to respond.

Interestingly enough, despite the diversity and divergences of opinion about the terminology, conceptualizations and evaluations that have characterised the debate on post-feminism in the 2000s, there still exists within scholarly circles an ample margin of consent on what constitutes the critical feature of post-feminist culture: that is to say, the incorporation of a series of typical elements of feminism into popular culture, into media discurses and representations, where they co-exist in a complex and contradictory relationship with contrasting elements and tendencies to 're-traditionalise' femininity. As Rosalind Gill writes: "In this post-feminist moment…feminist ideas are simultaneously incorporated, revised, and depolìticised" (2007a: 161).

According to Tasker and Negra: "Post-feminist culture works in part to incorporate, assume or naturalise aspects of feminism; it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer" (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 2). Andrea Press in turn points out "the media's tendency to reinforce simultaneously both feminist goals and the post-feminist repudiation of feminist gains" (Press, 2011: 110). In this connection Angela McRobbie has put forward the concept of 'double entanglement' to define the co-existence between neo-traditional values and demands for liberalisation: that is to say, between including and at the same time discarding feminism within popular culture. "Feminism is taken into account, but only to be shown to be no longer necessary" (McRobbie, 2009: 17).

Broadly speaking, then, this is the scenario that contemporary feminist media studies are faced with. Feminism is no longer deemed necessary, as the current conventional wisdom is that women - at any rate in Western society – have achieved equality or are at least sufficiently empowered to successfully attain personal goals in any field of private and public life. A lengthy list of women who have 'made it', be they managers, politicians, professionals, media celebrities, fictional heroines, offers in this connection an abundance of exemplars and models; the dazzling evidence of this allegedly achieved equality is liable to overshadow (though not to eliminate) the continuing existence of gender inequalities in contemporary societies.

In the context of a media environment that has considerably expanded, interconnected by digitally-enhanced technologies, television is still alive and well,

pronouncements of death notwithstanding. And television is at the forefront of the post-feminist trends that have dispersed through myriad sites of popular culture the intriguing and controversial interconnection between media and feminism. More precisely, television has been in the vanguard of this phenomenon since the 1980s, when post-feminist signals first began to surface. As pointed out by Julie d'Acci in her outstanding research that adopted a still unequalled 'integrated approach' encompassing production textuality and reception (d'Acci, 2002: 93), *Cagney and Lacey* (1981-88, CBS) was the first TV show to address feminist viewers and feminist issues from the position of a mainstream police series. Bonnie J. Dow, in her book published in the mid-1990s (1996), further documented the intersections between television and feminism in prime-time dramas of the 1980s and 1990s, making explicit reference to post-feminism. Amanda Lotz, for her part, has indicated a series of attributes of post-feminism that can be identified in the unprecedented variety of female-centred dramas which at the start of the twenty-first century have offered unusually complex portrayals of female characters (Lotz, 2001, 2006).

This is not to claim that television, or more generally the 'media manifold' (Couldry, 2012) and popular culture, has embraced feminist ideals and values. They may however be said to share "the acknowledgement of gender equality as a social good" (Budgeon, 2011: 184) that characterizes post-feminist cultural sensibility. In fact feminist values and goals are co-opted into discursive media constructs where they are often altered or contradicted, thus complicating the production of gendered subjectivities. "This provides a focus for feminist critique" (Budgeon, 2011: 184).

The co-option of the objectives and key words of feminism – *agency, empowerment, choice* – into popular entertainment is regarded with suspicion and scepticism in feminist scholarship circles. Most female media scholars take issue with the 'mainstreaming' of feminist ideals, on the grounds that they are diluted and adjusted so as to fit into an individualistic neo-liberal consumer culture, focused on consumption and the celebration of the body.

As Genz and Brabon (2009: 24-25) have observed, opposition towards the media, a characteristic of the initial phase of feminist media studies, is being reconfigured more specifically in the post-feminist context as opposition towards consumer culture and the sexualisation of the female body. Female sexual objectification, in particular, is blamed for reviving "old forms of oppression and colonisation of the body and of female sexuality" (Casalini, 2011: 46) in a new and questionable guise of women's self-determination and free choice. In consequence, the notion of sexism that seemed to have fallen into disuse has been resurrected and is used in criticism of the widespread practices of girls' and women's sexualisation to be found in advertising, the press, television, the cinema, video games and the internet alike. (Douglas, 2010; Gill, 2012).

Rather paradoxically, this insistent criticism ends up being as much pervasive in contemporary feminist media scholarship   as the phenomenon it address is ubiquitous in popular culture. In some way it also recalls feminist criticism's original obsession with sexual stereotypes. In truth there is some

justification for the fear that by putting sexualisation of the female figure at the centre of attention and making it a focal point of the criticisms aimed at the media and at popular culture in general, we run the risk of abandoning all the other issues in a sort of blind spot. Liesbet Van Zoonen, from her standpoint as an influential feminist academic and author of the now classic *Feminist Media Studies* (1994), has recently warned us against the blindness, already occurred in the past, of subordinating an entire agenda of important questions to the primacy of the (although legitimate) criticism towards a culture that is "so pervaded by images of perfect and (hetero) sexualised, predominantly female bodies" (Duits and Van Zoonen, 2011: 492). She has gone further, stating that the alarm about the vulnerability of today's young women, exposed to the insidious indoctrination of a strongly-sexualised popular culture, "is offensive and forswears decades of feminist research and politics" (Duits and Van Zoonen, 2011: 504).

Clearly the combination of the post-feminist cultural context and the plurality of the connected technologies and cultural forms that saturate the media environment we inhabit raises new challenges and revives old risks for contemporary feminist media studies. The risk, as I have already noted, is that of adopting a new posture of hostility, thus remaining trapped in what Carolyn M. Byerly has aptly named 'the paradigm of the misogynist media' (Byerly, 1999: 386). Encapsulated in this paradigm is a vision of the media as fundamentally embroiled – an exception is often made for the internet though – in conservative gender ideologies that allow for representational politics that undermine and trivialise women's gains in society, while pretending to take them into account. Although such a vision certainly captures one of the most insidious inflections of the women-and-media relationship – and one that calls for a high level of feminist attention and criticism – nonetheless it needs to be transcended, so as to allow feminist scholarship to regard and understand the complex patterns of this relationship from broader and more nuanced analytical perspectives. I refer once again to the trope of the 'curious feminist' to indicate that nowadays the question to be addressed by feminist media studies – as suggested by Merri Lisa Johnson – is '*What else is there to say?*' (2007: 14). The challenge that is worth tackling today implies going beyond (without disregarding or minimising) sexualisation and women's disempowerment and containment in popular culture: in order to explore *also* the progressive and empowering *potential* of the media, as they have to a lesser or greater extent integrated elements of feminism. At least alternatively, as suggested by Braithwaite (2002) feminist studies might take into account the role of media in helping to naturalize feminist ideas and desires and hence to improve women's status. If and how media play a part in supporting progress and not merely gender containment is a matter of interest to communication scholars, who are (or should be) highly concerned with the capacity of media to produce change.

I have deliberately referred earlier in this article to the claim made by both Joshua Meyrowitz and more recently Elihu Katz that television may operate in given circumstances as a resource for women's empowerment. For instance, a

television landscape that offers the choice of a rich array of 'amazingly complex' (Lotz, 2001: 114) and diverse female characters may create the conditions for female viewers to encounter "exciting new definitions and identities, also of feminist origin" – as Joke Hermes has acknowledged (Hermes, 2006: 93). By the same token we must bear in mind the possibility that the hybrid and contradictory nature of post-feminist culture, which informs in varying degrees the discursive constructions of gender in today's media, may allow for more complex rendering of the equally hybrid and contradictory nature of the identities and subjectivity of women. A fair number of feminist scholars (Lotz, Byelby, Genz and Brabon, Akass and MacCabe) have undertaken fruitful work in this direction, producing nuanced and comprehensive analyses of popular post-feminist series and heroines that embody ambivalence and conflicts experienced by contemporary women in everyday life.

But I remain of the view, and I am certainly not the first to maintain that the most critical challenge that feminist media studies are required to confront today concerns the study of audiences. Now that the impetus created by the paradigm shift in the 1980s has lost its impact, media consumption and reception have remained "one of the under-studied aspects of the women-and-media relationship" (Byerly, 2012: 11), owing to the pre-eminence that the textual approach, the focus on texts and representations, has notoriously achieved within feminist scholarship (and more generally in media studies).

Representations matter and have consequences: consequences that can be grasped only by inquiring what active, interpretative viewers do, think and say in relation to them (Couldry, 2012). This has always been a complicated matter to study, still more since the transformation of the media environment allowed for a range of innovative and diverse viewing patterns and modes of engagement with media content. Without over-emphasizing notions such as expanded media texts or trans-mediality, there may be a more significant divergence than ever between the discrete text as selected and analysed by critical scholars and the text as experienced by audiences in varying practices and contexts of consumption – which have a significant impact on processes of sense-making along with socio-cultural positioning of the viewing subjects. Thus it becomes a priority for feminist media scholarship to bring their inquiry into the sphere of the lived experience, where real women encounter (post-feminist) media discourses on gender. Failing to connect scholarly readings and interpretations of media texts with audiences' sense-making activity would risk further perpetuating the long-held hidden assumption of the ordinary woman's *otherness and separateness* in respect to the feminist intellectual, precisely when the embedding of feminism in popular culture seems to aim at reconciling, for better *and* for worse, feminist with feminine identity.

Doing feminist media studies has become an increasingly complex intellectual endeavour, but it is completely within the reach of an established scholarship that has proved to be resourceful, vibrant and reflexive: and whose capacity to meet the challenges of the changes in media, culture and society is nurtured by the unremitting commitment to help improve gender equality in the world we live in.

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