

BookReview: 'I'm a Feminist But . . .'

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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Yates, C. (2007). BookReview: 'I'm a Feminist But . . '. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 14(4), 365-367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505068070140040603>

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families and communities and history, and there is a continued need to air crucial questions of gender as embedded within past and contemporary 21st-century policies on welfare and community.

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'I'M A FEMINIST BUT . . .'

Rosalind Gill
Gender and the Media
 Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007, vi + 291 pp., ISBN 0745619150

At a recent Canadian media studies conference, a senior academic speaker was talking despondently about a visit she'd taken with her daughter to a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* convention. 'God!' she said wryly, with reference to the marketing of the femininity and related products on show, 'I felt like Adorno!' Her sentiment, presumably that it made her feel like an 'authoritarian personality', evokes the pessimism often articulated by feminists of a 'certain generation', when discussing representations of femininity within today's western media culture.

While avoiding many of the potential pitfalls of feminist pessimism regarding such imagery, Gill's book, *Gender and the Media*, sets out to unravel the conundrums of contemporary postfeminist media studies against the changing backdrop of a consumer culture, where the neoliberal values and practices of consumption have become dominant. Gill argues that, within this setting, representations of gender – and femininity in particular – have become increasingly defined in terms of the body and its reification as a reflexive project. In the contemporary climate, the body becomes something to be continually worked on and improved in line with the impossible aesthetic ideals of the mostly white, slender airbrushed bodies of youthful celebrities. Using the language of Foucault, Gill suggests that the external tyranny of the male gaze has been replaced by the internal, self-regulatory gaze of the subject herself. The second transformation of the media she addresses is the sexualization of bodies within popular culture, thus evoking debates about 'raunch culture' and the pervasive aesthetics of 'porn-chic' for girls and young women. Gill argues that within such a culture, young girls are sexualized through the marketing of clothes and goods and, in an inverted version of embracing their inner child, grown women are encouraged to outwardly embrace a culture of pink 'girlification' and the pursuit of youthful sexiness through punishing exercise regimes and the consumption of youth-enhancing body products.

So, Gill asks, how should feminist researchers respond to and analyse such imagery? And can the research methods of the past suffice? Focusing on issues of

representation rather than audience studies, she uses a range of sociologically inflected methods and theories to explore the implications of contemporary images of masculinity and femininity for a new feminist and cultural politics of the media. These themes are examined first through a chapter that reviews the history of feminist media texts and then through five media case studies, which include: advertising, news journalism, talk shows, magazines and postfeminist romance. The book concludes by discussing the implications of a postfeminist media culture for feminist research today.

Echoing Faludi's (1996) analysis of men's magazines in *Stiffed*, Gill says that the major difference between the 'sexist' imagery of today and that of the 1970s is, first, the postmodern knowingness of the imagery, where the deployment of irony works defensively to deflect criticism from any potentially 'po-faced' feminist waiting to pounce with her critical tools of deconstruction. Second, she points to the incorporation of liberal feminism and its language into 'the cultural field', which in its deployment, is emptied of its political significance. One can indeed cite numerous media outputs where the language of equal opportunities feminism is used, from *Oprah* in the US, and *Woman's Hour* on BBC Radio 4 in the UK. Yet, as in magazines such as *Elle* and *Glamour*, the messages of feminine freedom are often couched in neoliberal terms of the 'freedom to consume', and to 'please' or 'be one's self', which, given the consumer context of such pronouncements, usually implies a self shaped by the discourses of consumerism. In this way, Gill's book begins to define the messy territory of postfeminism, which she defines as a 'sensitivity', one that is essentially 'ambivalent' in its simultaneous acknowledgement and repudiation of feminist discourse.

For some, the postfeminist media landscape that includes iconic television shows such as *Sex in the City* or *Desperate Housewives* can be viewed positively as conveying an acknowledgement of the ambivalent, contradictory nature of feminine subjectivity and experience, albeit through affluent, fantasy settings. Likewise, one can argue that the up-front, active images of female sexuality today also represent a positive counterpoint to the passive and tame 'vanilla'-tinged images of feminine sexuality of previous years. Gill cites David Gauntlett (2002), who is critical of academics who don't 'get the joke' when confronted with the postmodern irony of 'lads' mags' such as *FHM*, or who fail to see the messages of sexual empowerment in contemporary gender imagery. Yet, as she points out, for others, such images constitute a new form of sexism and she cites Judith Williamson's belief that feminist researchers should be wary of pandering to 'pointless populism'. As the book progresses, it becomes apparent that Gill aligns herself more with the radicalism of the latter position. In highlighting the costs of the contemporary images of gender and the celebration of 'the body', she reminds us of the ways in which discourses of power are still reproduced through old hierarchies of 'race', ethnicity, heterosexuality and generation. In terms of gender, the consoling narrative of innate difference has become reified once more through the rise of evolutionary psychology and the pop psychology of 'Venus' and 'Mars' stereotypes.

Gill's own sceptical ambivalence regarding the postfeminist sensitivity is to be welcomed, particularly given the current postfeminist celebration of 'girl power' that underpins much work in the field of 'girl studies'. One reason perhaps, that

Gill is able to be critical of such imagery and its modes of address is that, while focusing on questions of representation, rather than issues of reception, she escapes the methodological difficulties of much empirical, sociological audience research, which, since Ang's (1985) work on *Dallas*, has tended to equate criticism with patronizing the subjects of that research. It may be, however, that the challenge for feminist researchers is to now extend Gill's critical study of representations to one that also includes a more critical study of audience reception and identification. Yet, as contemporary critiques of Radway (1984) and others imply, such critical scepticism regarding audience identification has become unfashionable in academic audience research.

Given the sociological emphasis of the book, the role of unconscious fantasy and affect is not addressed, although, interestingly, its language often appears, as in the 'ambivalence' and 'denials', which she says underpins postfeminism. Tantalizingly, Gill also touches on the language of psychoanalysis to describe the generational tensions between second and third wave feminists. One can argue that Walkerdine's (1990) work on the unconscious investments girls make in the pursuit of heterosexual femininity might have also added something to the discussion regarding the emotional investment that girls and women make as they continue to align themselves, often with ambivalence and great difficulty, with the discourses of contemporary femininity. It seems a pity that the two traditions of media studies, one which draws more on sociology and film studies, and the other which applies methods derived more from literary criticism and psychoanalysis, could not share more in this respect. Indeed, given the current media landscape, and the need to problematize the pleasures of popular culture, then the sensitive appropriation of such theories and methods within an interdisciplinary framework that acknowledges the specificities of the sociocultural and historical context, would seem the way to go.

To conclude, *Gender and the Media* is a lively and stimulating read and works as an excellent introduction for students in the field of media and gender studies. It is also a grown-up book that moves beyond the current feminist preoccupation with 'girls', to a renewed focus on 'women' in their infinite variety. I strongly recommend it.

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