

The Body Through Women's Eyes (1994) <i>Joanna Frueh</i> .....	127
Constructing the Body	
Reading the Slender Body (1993) <i>Susan Bordo</i> .....	151
Plastic Surgery: Self-Improvement or Self-Harm? (2000) ✓ <i>Margo Maine</i> .....	175
Pump it Up: Sports, Athleticism, and the New Cheerleader (2003) ✓ <i>Natalie Adams</i> .....	191
The Athletic Esthetic (1996) <i>Holly Brubach</i> .....	223
Images and Roles	
The Mommy Wars: How the Media Turned Motherhood Into a Catfight (2000) <i>Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels</i> .....	233
From Motherless Children to Rhinestone Cowgirls: At the Crossroads of Feminism and Country Music (2001) <i>Julie Craig</i> .....	247
Images, Culture, & Misogyny	
The Deportation of Barbie from Iran (1999) <i>Farzaneh Milani</i> .....	259
A Question of Class (1994) <i>Dorothy Allison</i> .....	269
What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity (1976) ✓ <i>Elaine H. Pagels</i> .....	291

---

# Women, Representation and Culture

---

Judith Mayne

How do feminists approach women and representation? The term "representation" is necessarily broad, encompassing the word (spoken and written, fact and fiction) as well as the image (still images, as in photography or painting; moving images, as in television and cinema); "high" art and popular culture. Representation encompasses newspaper articles as well as poems; family photograph albums as well as painting in museums; television sitcoms as well as experimental films. Central to all of these different kinds of representation is their constructed quality. Representations are just that, re-presentations, recreations and interpretations of the world of objects, dreams, and experiences. They require a producer, sometimes this is a single person, and sometimes a collaborative team. Representations require a medium, a form of expression—from the voice to the pen and paper (or computer keyboard and screen), from the camera to the paintbrush and canvas.

The disadvantage of a broad term like "representation" is that it covers so much, but the advantage of this wide coverage is that we can see connections between very different forms. Feminist critics in the 1970s discovered that some representations of women spanned centuries and were visible in different art forms. For instance, a common representation of women involved the

madonna versus the whore. Whereas male characters would be offered an entire range of possibilities, women tended to be divided into two opposing categories, one representing impossible perfection, the other equally impossible evil, and usually it was sexuality that made the difference (women who displayed it were evil; those who didn't were good). The opposition was present in painting, in cartoons, in books, and in movies.

Usually the whore is punished and the madonna triumphs; think of the film *Fatal Attraction* (1987), for example, in which sex-crazed Alex (Glenn Close) is contrasted in virtually every imaginable way with the ideal wife and mother Beth (Anne Archer), until finally Alex is annihilated (by Beth no less). Obvious as though the opposition may be in *Fatal Attraction*, it also plays with stereotypes, for often the madonna is blonde and the whore brunette; here, just the opposite is true. Indeed, as the blonde/brunette distinction suggests, the madonna/whore distinction relies on race as well as gender, either by identifying African American womanhood exclusively in relationship to sexuality (the Jezebel stereotype), or by creating exaggerated oppositions between African American women (think of Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen in *Gone with the Wind* [1939]). Social class plays a role as well, for often the "madonna" is middle- or upper-class and the "whore" either poor or working-class (for example, the novel and various film versions of *Stella Dallas* oppose poor, trashy Stella to the upper-class woman who will eventually replace her as mother to Stella's daughter). And so too are representations of lesbianism often marked by the madonna/whore opposition; in pulp novels of the 1950s, for example, the lesbian was often characterized as sexually insatiable, a seductive menace to the heterosexual woman she attempts to seduce.

By focusing on these representations within a specific time period, for example, we can understand how certain assumptions about gender are represented in similar ways in very different forms. By examining such representations over time, within the context of a single medium, we can understand how different forms respond both to history and cultural change in a variety of ways. By looking at how gender intersects with race and class, we can understand how representation draws on the connections between different forms of social experience.

Representations rely on various forms of cultural understanding. Artists, writers and producers are a part of the very culture

that they represent in their works. At the same time, some forms of representation manage to reach across time and across cultures, and to speak to different audiences in different ways. All audiences reinvent works of the past to respond to their own understandings of the world and their own needs. Feminists are no exception. In the novels of nineteenth-century British author Jane Austen, many feminists have seen explorations of women's relationships to the institutions of marriage and property that seem resoundingly contemporary, not to mention a narrative voice that observes the world with great beauty and wit.

The generation of feminist critics and researchers who began to explore and question representations in the 1960s and 1970s were guided by a number of assumptions. They shared the assumption that representations both reflect the culture from which they emerge, and have the ability to shape that culture in turn. Representation, then, is both reflective and transformative. Generations of female film viewers discovered that the movies had provided them with lessons in how to become an acceptable woman, complete with lessons in how to dress and how to catch a man. At the same time, the movies had also provided powerful fantasies of what women could be and could do, beyond looking pretty and living happily ever after with the right man. Passionate readers remembered how the world of books transported them to lands where often women were expected to act as men's inferiors, but where women also performed acts of great courage and tried to create lives that were full and meaningful. Memories of popular songs from the past were bittersweet, for when women sang they often sang of heartbreak, but just as often their voices gave hope, pleasure, and a sense of solidarity with other women.

Representation can function both to reinforce oppressive standards of feminine behavior and to imagine possibilities not typically available to women. Representation, then, is both a form of socialization and a form of utopia, representation can contribute to enforcing patriarchal stereotypes, but it can also envisage other possibilities, other ways of being. Sometimes this re-imagining involves age-old stereotypes, such as Toni Morrison's rewriting of the madonna/whore stereotypes in her 1972 novel *Sula*. Some feminist critics have tried to divide art forms between those that enforce socialization versus those that promise utopian possibilities. In feminist film studies, for example, some feminists see Hollywood cinema as inevitably corrupt insofar as images of

women are concerned, and have argued that only in reinventing the cinema, in form as well as content, will it be possible to create a truly new, feminist cinema. From this vantage point, a film like *Thelma and Louise* (1991) ultimately reinforces the impossibility of women's autonomy, and only in independent films like Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman* (1996) do we see a truly promising revision of women's lives. Others have seen Hollywood cinema as less monolithic, and have argued that depending on the kind of film and the way it is made, it is possible to see Hollywood films as speaking to women in powerful and not always simply oppressive ways. From this vantage point, *Thelma and Louise* is important for Callie Khouri's screenplay, for Geena Davis's and Susan Sarandon's performances, and for a tale of female friendship that revises many assumptions of a type of film—the buddy film—usually reserved for men.

In the early 1970s, it was common to assume that works by male artists or producers would be more likely to reflect patriarchal assumptions than those by women. That assumption led to various attempts to rediscover female writers, artists and producers whose works had not been remembered. At the same time, this search for notable women in the past led feminists to reconsider just what constitutes "art" in the first place. To be sure, some great women artists and writers had been obscured from official histories. But other women had produced works of great beauty—quilts, diaries, songs—that were not even considered art. The broad term "representation" thus encourages us to see all images, stories, and texts as potentially interesting.

---

## FURTHER READINGS

---

- Deepwell, Katy, ed. *New feminist art criticism: critical strategies*. Manchester University Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, c 1995.
- Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974.
- Kuhn, Annette. *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*. London and Boston: Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.
- Showalter, Elaine, ed. *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. New York: Pantheon, 1985.

- Skeggs, Beverley, ed. *Feminist Cultural Theory: Process and Production*. Manchester University Press, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Dash, Julie. *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African-American Woman's Film*. Key Note International Distribution Co., 1992.
- Douglas, Susan J. *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. New York: Random House, 1994.
- Hooks, Bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End P, 1992.
- Kim, Elaine H, Lilia V. Villanueva and Asian Women United. *Making More Waves: New Writing by Asian American Women*. Beacon P, 1997.
- Lee, Valerie. *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-Ditched Readings*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Patridge, Elizabeth. *Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life*. Smithsonian Institute P, 1994.
- Robolledo, Tey Diana and Elena S. Rivero, Eds. *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature*. Univ. of Arizona P, 1993.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Anchor P, 1990.

## introduction

THE AZTECS HAD QUETZALCOATL AND THE UNDERWORLD OF Tlalocan. The Egyptians had Isis and Osiris. The Greeks had Homer. The Elizabethans had Shakespeare. We have *American Idol*, *Us Weekly*, and Angelina Jolie.

Actually, when *Bitch* was born we had *Beverly Hills*, 90210; *Reality Bites*; and *Mademoiselle*. It was 1996, but even then, before the popular advent of the Internet, reality TV, and blogs, pop culture comprised our contemporary oral traditions, shaped our modern myths, and provided us with our gods and goddesses. As freshly minted liberal-arts college graduates with crappy day jobs and a serious media jones, we were prime targets for movies, TV, ads, and glossy magazines, all of which fell over themselves telling us how to dress, what to eat, where to work, where to go after work, whom to lust after, and how to lust, period. More than that, they sought to tell us—as they seek to tell everyone—who we were.

The thing is, we pretty much already knew who we were—or at least who we weren't. We weren't breathy, baby-voiced Kelly, using her bruised-blonde shtick to steal Dylan away from Brenda. We weren't Elizabeth Berkley in *Showgirls*, shtupping Kyle MacLachlan in a pool in hopes of career advancement. We weren't the waifish, expensively clothed girls draped mournfully across the pages of *Vogue* and *Bazaar*. We weren't even Xena, warrior princess. What we were was curious about what those fictional

women and their representational peers had to tell us about our cultural take on femininity, “proper” male and female behavior, and women’s place in the world.

We were also obsessed with how pop culture treats—and by “treats” we mean ignores, sidelines, and denigrates—feminism. The mid- to late ’90s saw the rise of so-called postfeminism. The concept wasn’t necessarily new; it was associated with postmodernism and French feminism, and introduced to nonacademics in a 1982 *New York Times Magazine* article titled “Voices From the Post-Feminist Generation.” But now, all of a sudden, there were books about postfeminism, references to it in film and literary criticism, even an entire website called the Postfeminist Playground where a group of women wrote about sex, culture, and relationships from a standpoint that assumed a world where the gains of feminism were unequivocal and its goals roundly met.

Postfeminism is, perhaps not surprisingly, very similar to old-fashioned antifeminism; at bottom, it suggests that the culture at large is just fine and that our pervasive, ongoing struggles with, for instance, workplace equality or work/family balance aren’t societal problems—they’re personal ones. And winking slogans like “Postfeminism: Boys Like It” revealed an image of feminism and feminists that was still loaded down with some very familiar, very unattractive baggage. The term was (and still is) an insult to the legacy of feminism, an eye-rolling suggestion that we need to get over it and move on, already. But postfeminism can exist only in a postsexist world, and we’re not there by a long shot.

If we were, feminism wouldn’t still have this persistent image problem. A gorgeous woman like Ashley Judd can be loud and proud about being a feminist—even appearing on the cover of *Ms.* in a T-shirt reading “This Is What a Feminist Looks Like”—but when tasked with conjuring up feminism, most of the mainstream media still sees lumpy, frizzy, hairy she-trolls advancing with castrating knives in hand. It’s this persistent misconception that sometimes makes our *f* word seem so much more controversial than that other one. Every young feminist has a story about the time she had a run-in with it. Maybe it was chatting with a high-school classmate about an upcoming march for reproductive rights, only to hear her deliver the gentle dis: “Well, I believe in equal rights, but I don’t need to march for it.” Maybe it was overhearing a male peer complaining in the col-

lege dining hall, “I’m here to *learn*, not to hear about women’s issues.” Maybe it was a new friend responding to an offhand comment about not fitting the girly-girl mold with, “You’re not one of those militant feminists, are you?” As twenty-three-year-old women in 1996 (and as thirtysomethings now), we found it ridiculous and enraging that such simple concepts—that women deserve equality, that gender shouldn’t determine the course of our lives, and that the world we live in is often arranged in a way that does not serve these goals—freak people out so much. And the sparks of indignation we felt ignited a burning need to correct the record about what both women and feminism can and should be.

That indignation is a big part of why we chose to call the magazine *Bitch*. (If you were wondering about that name, you’re not alone.) We’d argue that these days the word “bitch” is as loaded as the term “feminist”—both are lobbed at uppity ladies who dare to speak up and who don’t back down. This is not to say that *Bitch* is down with being gratuitously mean or **catty**; no, we just know that taking a stand is usually more important than being nice. ‘Cause here’s the thing about “bitch”: When it’s being used as an insult, the word is most often aimed at women who speak their minds, who have opinions that contradict conventional wisdom, and who don’t shy away from expressing them. If being an outspoken woman means being a **bitch**, we’ll take that as a compliment, thanks. And if we do, the word loses its power to hurt us. Furthermore, if we can get people thinking about what they’re saying when they use the word, all the better. Last, but certainly not least, “bitch” is efficiently multipurpose—it not only describes who we are when we speak up, it describes the very act of making ourselves heard.

That said, we are aware that the word carries a difficult, complex legacy (though the many people who call the office to berate us about the title may think it’s all too simple), as well as the fact that its popularity as an epithet is more sanctioned than ever. And yet we still think, ten years later, that it’s the most appropriate title for a magazine that’s all about talking back.

And what better to talk back to in this intensely mediated day and age than the boundless source of material that is pop culture? Anyone who protests that a focus on pop culture distracts from “real” feminist issues and lacks a commitment to social change needs to turn on the TV—it’s a public gauge of attitudes about everything from abortion (witness all the convenient miscarriages that befall characters torn between keeping and

aborting their pregnancies) to poverty (two words: welfare queen) to political power (if *Commander in Chief* is accurate about nothing else, it nails the fact that our first female president will be scrutinized through the lens of gender every day of her working life). Contemporary feminism has always had ties to popular culture and its representation of women: Gloria Steinem's first big break was "I Was a Playboy Bunny," her exposé of the working conditions of the cottontailed waitresses in Hugh Hefner's Playboy Clubs; two of the highest-profile early women's-lib actions were a protest of the Miss America Pageant and a sit-in at *Ladies' Home Journal*.

The notion at the heart of *Bitch* is simply this: If the personal is political, as that famous phrase goes, the pop is even more so. And like that other maxim, its truth doesn't mean that we can ignore the other things that are also political. On the contrary, they all go together—living-wage campaigns with critiques of *Maid in Manhattan*, antiviolenace organizing with questions about why the Lifetime channel loves its women so victimized—informing each other to keep this movement vital. The world of pop culture is, in a metaphor that has turned out to be all too close to literal, the marketplace of ideas; if we're not there checking out the wares, we won't be able to respond effectively—or put our own contributions on offer.

At the time we first ventured into the Xerox-and-pasteup world of zine making, we were frustrated readers as much as burgeoning activist writers. We wanted to read something that would put the lie to the cliché of young women the nation over saying, "Well, I'm not a feminist or anything," before voicing their desire for equal treatment. We wanted to read something that would call the news media on its ghettoization of feminist viewpoints and its vicious stone-casting at women like Anita Hill and Patricia Bowman, who stood up to abusive behavior from a future Supreme Court justice and members of the Kennedy family, respectively, and were dragged through the mud for their efforts. We wanted to read something that talked about why all the actresses on the cover of *Spin* or *Rolling Stone* were dressed in lingerie with their mouths hanging open. We wanted to read something that talked back to the forces that had been talking to us for years: the ones telling us and countless others that, say, men are useful only for the two-carat diamonds they provide, that without children our lives will be sad and

incomplete in spite of dazzling careers and intense friendships, that consumer freedom is just as good as social equality.

We realized that if we wanted to read something like this, we would have to write it ourselves.

As the magazine took shape, we saw in it the potential to be more than a forum to air our complaints—we saw that it could be an agent of real change. If we asked more girls and women to stop and think critically about the pop culture they're encouraged to consume unquestioningly, we figured that maybe in some small way we could contribute to changing its messages. If we could encourage a generation of young women and men to look at the culture around them through a lens that prioritized gender representations, they'd be inspired to protest that culture—and maybe by the time those people became ad executives, TV producers, and studio heads, they'd be creating a pop culture that truly reflects all genders accurately. We wanted to remind people, ourselves included, to ask questions about the messages in their media and to speak up—to each other and to the corporations and culture makers behind those messages.

We still do.