

Media and gender: Constructing feminine identities in a postmodern culture

Abstract

In the postmodern era the impact media have on our lives is continuously growing. Not only do media reflect reality, but they also shape and reconstruct it according to the public's hopes, fears or fantasies. Reality itself is not the sum of all objective processes and things, but it is socially constructed by the discourses that reflect and produce power. On the other hand, the public does not simply accept or reject the media messages, but interprets them according to its social background (Zoonen, 1994, p. 41).

My interest lies in identifying how are women represented in the media and what are the dominant images of femininity, as well as the alternative ones. There is a strong connection between image and identity as the latter can not be constructed without the former. Basically, the postmodern subject has been reduced to an image, therefore the image plays an important part in constructing the feminine identity.

Postmodern identity and the media

The postmodern discourse questions the concept of identity itself, since it appears as a myth and an illusion. According to Jean Baudrillard, the autonomous subject is falling apart and disappears (Kellner, 2001, p.278). A dismembered and discontinuous type of experience represents the fundamental characteristic of the postmodern culture, and can be found in personal experiences, as well as in the media texts.

The postmodern identity consists of constructing an image and assuming a social role. The postmodern identity is centered around leisure time, appearance, image, consumerism and is based on producing an image. The postmodern identity tends to be constructed mainly of images of entertainment and consumerism, therefore it is unstable and always subject to change. However, there is a positive aspect suggesting that the individuals can change their lives at anytime, that the identity can be reconstructed and that the human being can be changed and modeled according to personal choice. Identity becomes a game, a theatrical presentation of the self, allowing the individuals to present themselves to the others in a variety of postures, roles, images and activities. The postmodern self becomes a multiple one and is more open to changes. In the contemporary society, identity is strongly mediated by images provided by the mass culture, offering ideals for modeling one's personal identity. For instance, advertising, fashion or television constantly reconstruct the identity, producing a more fluid and changing one (Kellner, 2001, p. 305). In the postmodern culture of image, the scenes, the stories and the cultural texts provided by the media are meant to offer the individuals a variety of attitudes that can shape their personality. These images provide social role models, appropriate and inappropriate patterns of behavior, style and fashion and a subtle impulse of

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imitating and identifying with certain identities. However, individuals may choose whatever model they wish, be it a dominant or an alternative (therefore less popular) one. Media do not tend to construct a subject (or to encourage the individuals to identify themselves as subjects), but to offer ready-made identities, inviting individuals to identify themselves with certain figures, images or positions. In our culture individuals learn to see themselves through the eyes of the others. They discover that their image is more important than their experience or knowledge. Since the others will judge them by the products they own, by their outfits and their personality, they adopt a theatrical view of their own "performance". The postmodern world pays a great deal of attention to superficial images and impressions, to such extent that the individuals become almost impossible to distinguish from their surface.

Images of femininity in the contemporary mass culture

In what regards the feminine identity, it is constructed according to the postmodern model. In other words, it is acquired when the woman manages to display an image commonly recognized as "feminine" and to play a role suited to her gender. Since the instruments of mass culture are used for educating the public, I intend to explain how they define femininity in order to understand how women appear portrayed in the postmodern culture. If individuals acquire an identity by constructing an image and playing a role, then an individual "becomes" someone if s/he is able to construct a personal identity that can be recognized by the others. A feminine identity has been successfully constructed if the external observers can recognize a "feminine" body associated with a "feminine" behavior. Here I will refer mainly to the construction of the feminine body in a postmodern context.

Media provide images and figures that spectators can imitate and identify with. These images play an important part in socializing and educating individuals using social and sexual role models (as well as a lot of different positions of the individual) that value certain patterns of behavior and a certain style, while discouraging any others. This is particularly true when we refer to women's representation in the media. Media are efficient means for disseminating the dominant discourse of power and for disguising it into a matter of "common sense". Therefore, artificially created needs, norms and standards regarding the female body are presented as natural and normal. Firstly, I will analyze how is the feminine body represented in the media and secondly, what roles are women encouraged to assume.

The "feminine" and the "masculine" are defined using binary oppositions: subject/object, essence/appearance, culture/nature, reason/passion, active/passive, spirit/matter. The second terms of these binary oppositions are attributed to the "feminine". In order to be recognized as "feminine", women must internalize the "feminine" values and to construct their identities accordingly. Since femininity is associated with matter, the symbol of femininity is the female body. In contemporary culture, the body, especially the female one, is regarded as an object that can be shaped and modeled to match the promoted beauty standards. The media are an efficient instrument that both reflect and shape social realities. The ideal of femininity media promote also reflects women's position in a certain society.

I will use Jeremy Bentham's *panopticon* as a metaphor to illustrate how the control and surveillance performed over the female body from outside tend to act automatically, from inside, once a certain ideal of femininity has been internalized. Media define

femininity in relation to beauty and youth, as these are dominant values in the contemporary culture. I am interested in the media discourse on the feminine body and on the roles it considers to suit women best.

Michel Foucault defines the panopticon as a highly efficient instrument of surveillance and control that is present in all modern institutions (Foucault, 1997, pp. 279-315). Inside the panopticon the observer can see without being seen, while the observed are permanently exposed. The object of control is aware of its permanent visibility, therefore obeys all rules. Since the individuals can never see their observer, they can never know if they *are* actually watched, but only that they *could* be watched. This mechanism grants the automatic effects of power, causing the observed to become their own principle of subjection. The external surveillance becomes self-surveillance, so that any other external constraint is no longer needed. As for the female body, it is enough for the woman to internalize that she is being an object of the masculine gaze so as to obsessively control and survey her gestures, postures and looks. The practices women use in order to subscribe to the contemporary ideal of beauty (excessive diets or plastic surgeries, for instance) affect their physical health and, since the femininity standards are difficult to reach, women are compelled to live most of their lives with a feeling of deficiency, of not being good enough, which means that a severe control over the body can also affect the mind. As it appears, the key-concepts the media discourse operates with are "surveillance" and "control" over the female body, both external and internal. Media use this strategy so as to shape women's bodies as well as to fashion their social roles.

I will explain how self-surveillance and self-examination techniques operate for the case of women's bodies. Firstly, an increased visibility of women's bodies is created for the panoptic observers, hence for "invisible" agents. Media sets standards for the shape and the dimensions of the "beautiful" body, according to a series of binary oppositions regarding, for instance, the normal/ abnormal size of the body. The women whose bodies do not match the ideal standards need to be "normalized" through a series of practices of self-surveillance and self-control. Such discourses regarding the aspect of the body suggest that there's always a need for improvement. Control is granted by producing norms, by associating women to certain identity types and by offering certain solutions to the artificially created needs. Normative femininity is made of a series of disciplinary practices regarding the body, its gestures, its appetite, its shape and its aspect. The great advantage of the disciplinary model of power is that it replaces violence with normalization (Price, 1999, p. 195).

Women's image in the media reflects social prejudices regarding women's most appropriate roles in a given society. Media are efficient means of dissemination and control. They play the observer's role in a virtual panopticon, exposing women's bodies in detail, setting norms for their shape and dimensions, providing the methods to model one's body according to standards and sanctioning every exception to the rule. Women are kindly invited to control their bodies. A woman who constantly controls the way she looks, dresses, what she eats, is a subject of self-surveillance. This is the reflection in her conscience that she is a subject of surveillance in ways a man is not and no matter what she does, she is, first of all, a body, and her role is to arouse and to decorate. This state of permanent visibility has been induced to women to grant the automatic effects of power. Women are prisoners in this virtual panopticon as, once aware they are being objects of the gaze, they apply to themselves the normalizing politics of control and self-surveillance. In the contemporary patriarchal culture women act as if a masculine observer were permanently watching them.

Role models for women: dominant versus alternative

In what concerns women's social roles, mass culture provides the public with a variety of models that reflect, however, cultural beliefs and gender stereotypes. Each model stresses certain qualities, yet some models prevail. We may say that some models seem dominant while the "alternative" ones are quite few and are often considered to be rather "unfeminine". The public is taught that some attitudes and activities are more suited to women than others. Media offer us traditional representations of women as well as different, "emancipated" ones. Women can choose from a wide range of social roles that can be performed both in the private and in the public space.

Once again, femininity is defined according to the binary oppositions mentioned above. The second term, associated to the feminine, appears as inferior, even opposed to the first term. The man appears as rational, active, independent, while the woman appears as passive, dependent, subject to passions. Therefore, the tasks that require responsibility, competitiveness, ambition, initiative, intelligence, strength (such as earning an income, taking political decisions, leading an institution) are traditionally attributed to men, while those requiring care, empathy, nurturing, obedience, submission, are attributed to women. Based on this separation between masculine and feminine, the roles women and men perform in the private and in the public space are divided as well: men are the central authority of the family, the bread-winners, producers of material goods and representatives of their family in the public space, while women are unpaid domestic workers, nurturers, reproducers and subordinates. This separation prevails in the public space as the top position within a hierarchy (be it a political, organizational or institutional one) is usually held by men, while women are usually subordinates and mediators, working in the low-paid sectors of the labor market, performing similar activities to those at home.

Family is a central value in traditional, patriarchal societies, therefore mass culture products celebrate the values of the traditional family. The traditional family appears as a hierarchy having the man at the top and the wife and children - as subordinates. Opposite to this traditional model is the egalitarian family. The two partners share private and public responsibilities so that neither one of them is subordinate to the other. The traditional roles for women are those of wives and mothers, of beautiful objects and reproducers. Traditional women find their fulfillment in the private sphere, in nurturing the other members of their family. On the contrary, the emancipated women invest their time and efforts in their personal development, in building a career. For them marriage and motherhood are an option they might decide not to choose. In the public space, these women appear as professionally successful, rational, ambitious, talented and hard-working. They are endowed with the so called "masculine" features.

Anyhow, the "alternative" role models media promote are not radically different from the traditional ones. Moreover, the alternative media offer us a traditional model of femininity that has been added some liberal elements. To put it differently, besides beauties and mothers, feminine women also appear as professionals, successful in the public space. The growing importance of the image undermines women's social position. Besides their duties of mothers, wives, workers, women also have the duty to look good. They have to obey men's desires and beauty standards, being valued mainly as beautiful objects. The new ideal of femininity strengthens the male domination, since women must look good with the only purpose of attracting and keeping a man. These new standards require that women should be young and slim, domestic workers, reproducers, lov-

ing wives and mothers, intelligent, ambitious career women altogether. Media suggests women should be able to do it all. Women's failure to identify themselves with this model is seen as a personal failure due to personal flaws, while the model itself is not being contested.

Media presents a distorted model of the emancipated femininity: instead of liberating women from their status of objects and instead of placing them on an equal position with men both at work and at home, media creates "the perfect woman", setting standards very difficult to reach (and even more difficult to preserve) and promoting women who seem to match this ideal. When portraying a woman, media follow three coordinates: the image (if she subscribes to the ideal of beauty), the private life (if she has a partner, if she has children), the career (how talented she is in her work). This scheme is useful for manipulating women's attitudes towards the alternative models of femininity as our culture is centered on image and leisure time, therefore personal image and private life appear to be more important than any relevant activities in the public space. So, if a successful career woman is not young and slim, is not married, divorced or has no children, the readers will not look up to her for their system of values is different. Each time a woman appears as independent, rational, successful, the stress is moved on her personal life (she has no partner, no children or is not attractive) so as to undermine her professional achievements. The cost for being "different" is too high and women are not willing to give up their femininity (beauty and motherhood) in exchange for liberation.

The alternative models are present, though. Different models are accepted and integrated in the "official" culture only if they submit to some traditional aspects. In other words, a career woman is a fine model for women as long as she preserves her femininity, as long as she is attractive and appears as a wife and a mother. Media manipulates women into rejecting the "emancipated" model by portraying intelligent or successful women as deprived of family or personal life. In our culture family is still seen as a source of fulfillment for women. Most women are not prepared to postpone the chance of getting married and having children in order to be successful at work. The image is also very important since it is the very symbol of femininity, so if the career women do not look feminine, the public will reject them and women will refuse to identify themselves with such models.

Conclusions

Since middle-class women have been sequestered from the world, isolated from one another, and their heritage submerged with each generation, they are more dependent than men are on the cultural models on offer, and more likely to be imprinted by them. Given few role models in the world, women seek them on the screen and on the glossy page (Wolf, 1992, p.58). In these conditions, media representations of femininity have a strong impact on women and on the shaping of their identities. Women are supposed to have a variety of models to choose from when constructing their image and assuming their roles, but the truth is that their options are quite limited and induced by the media discourse. After they have internalized the standards of femininity, their choices regarding image and role models are quite predictable.

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