Feminine Experience

Media Education and Gender Representation

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Acknowledgements

I dedicate this labour of love to my first guru. Thank you Swami for teaching me that the end of knowledge is love, the end of wisdom is freedom and the end of education is character.

Namaste

I honour the place within you where we are one.

Abstract

This doctoral thesis examines the ways young women experience media education in sixth form, with particular emphasis on their experience of gender representation lessons. Secondary research objectives include an examination of how young women regard the development of their own critical media literacy and how they conceive of the effects of media education on their self-esteem. Through classroom observations and interviews with A-level Media Studies teachers and female students, this research explores three key areas of focus in understanding young women's experiences: media representations of feminine aesthetics and the sexualisation of feminine appearance, the negotiation between course material and students' personal engagement with media, and lastly reflections on how critical media literacy is defined and developed within the Media Studies course.

The thesis discusses ways in which content both constrains and enables students' development of critical media literacy. The role of chosen exam boards, teaching styles, and forms (i.e. upper sixth form versus lower sixth form) are examined as influencing factors. Specific lessons from observations, which students reflected upon during interviews, are also discussed in order to understand the process of teaching and learning about gender representation. A feminist discourse is at times present though mostly in covert ways. A greater consideration for contemporary feminist work would resolve some of the current difficulties faced by educators in their efforts to develop students' critical awareness, specifically when teaching about the representation of women. Female students often reflect what Gill has termed a 'postfeminist sensibility' (2007: 254); however, this exists in varying degrees. In certain contexts students tend to articulate more 'traditional' feminist values. In relation to one of the secondary research objectives, students find that A-level Media Studies improves the self-esteem of their physical appearance; however, other findings reveal that the extensive focus on textual analysis of sexualised and idealised representations of women can sometimes counter-act the aspects which students referenced as beneficial to their self-esteem. Despite many recommendations for improving the teaching of gender representation that are offered here, it is evident that some solutions are dependent on broader shifts occurring at the level of the education system.

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Introduction: Gender, Representation and Media Studies

One of the main aims of media education is to develop students' critical abilities in relation to mass media. Advanced-level (A-level) Media Studies especially emphasises the development of students' critical autonomy through the analysis of media texts and theories. Part of the curriculum is dedicated to the study of gender representation, and this provides an institutional space in which girls are encouraged to engage in a critical analysis of the relationship between gender and media. As a consequence, examining this 'space' allows us to consider girls' experiences of how this aspect of the curriculum is taught and how this might influence their understanding of the relationship between media and gender. Past research that has investigated the relationship between media and young women focuses on how they are affected by mis-representations of women. What is too often overlooked is the complexity with which these women engage with popular media. As McRobbie notes, there is a need to conduct research of female youth culture which analyses 'what is entailed in the processes of looking at and consuming these cultural forms' (2009: 99). This thesis examines this question in the context of the contemporary education system, using 'gender and representation' classes as a case study. It seeks to address the following research questions:

Primary Research Question:

How might we understand young women's experiences of efforts by A-level media educators to enhance their critical understanding of gender representation?

Secondary Research Question 1:

How do young women regard the development of their own critical media literacy?

Secondary Research Question 2:

How do they conceive of the effects of media education on their self-esteem?

Defining Some Key Terms

Before moving forward, there are certain terms which are employed abundantly throughout this document and require some clarification and justification. The first central concept of this research appears in the thesis' sub-title: media education. The terms media studies, media literacy and media education vary regionally and, as Dehli notes, 'there is…much debate among practitioners and scholars about these terms' (2009: 70). In an effort to precisely define each, Dehli 'suggest[s] that the *media literacy* of students is the aim of *media education*, considered as practice, while *media studies* encompasses research and analysis of media content, forms, technologies, ownership and so on' (ibid. 70-71, emphasis my own). A further distinction between upper case 'Media Studies' ('a singular noun designating an institutionalized, self-conscious grouping') and lower case 'media studies' ('a plural designation referencing a broader range of work distributed across humanities, social science and even technological fields') has also been proposed by some, particularly in the UK, where media education occurs throughout secondary school and even to some extent in primary schools as an element of literacy education (Corner, 1995: 148). Robson, Simmons and Sohn-Rethel (1990) offer their own distinction between Media Studies and media education. They make reference to the study of media as both a domain and a dimension (ibid. 171). 'Media Studies, the domain, exists as a discrete element on timetables, has its own object of study, its own set of concepts and pedagogy' (ibid.). Media education, on the other hand, is embedded within all subjects and viewed as 'a dimension of the whole curriculum' (ibid. 172).

Of course, the term 'media literacy' and the accuracy of the literacy metaphor remains highly debated among scholars, practitioners and policy-makers. Whilst many continue to reference 'media literacy' as a key goal of media education (Share, 2009) others recommend that 'we should simply expand our notions of what it is to be literate' (Bazalgette, n.d.). There is a further group of individuals with an interest in multimodal literacies (e.g. digital literacy, game literacy, new literacy) which has been received with scepticism by some proponents of media education (see Buckingham, 2010). The complexity of the issue is even more apparent when 'media education practitioners continue to use the term [media literacy] for pragmatic and

political leverage whilst arguing for alternative semantics with one another' (Kendall and McDougall, 2012: 2).[1] In order to explore further and understand the literacy metaphor I devote a section to these debates in chapter 1 (see section 1.1.6). For purposes of clarity, simplicity and inclusivity across regions, I refer in this thesis to media literacy and media education interchangeably (as Dehli and others from a North American context often do). To remain consistent with previous scholarly and policy publications, I make reference to the A-level specialist examined course as Media Studies. Any mention in this thesis to the broader range of media research and analysis is either described as: 'studies of media' or (all lowercase) 'media studies'.

Though traditionally media have been conceived as singular 'texts' or sources of information (e.g. a television programme, a magazine, an article) it bears repeating that much media scholarship has attempted to situate these singular media texts within more complex media environments. In other words, the media function in the lives of audiences in pluralistic ways and in multiple spaces (Couldry, 2012). Any attempt, then, to identify a singular or closed reading of isolated media messages fails to engage with a more 'true to life' understanding of media. Consequently, media education practices should address the potential for individual media texts to carry different (and possibly conflicting) meanings when juxtaposed with other mediated and non-mediated sources of information. The extent to which this principle is followed in the media classrooms involved in this project is debatable and this is a point I will return to in subsequent chapters.

A second central concept in this thesis immediately follows in the sub-title: gender representation. Gender has been defined and theorised in a number of ways. Connell (1985) has described conceptualisations of gender as either belonging to one of two broad approaches. The first views gender 'as a social script which people learn and enact' (1985: 262). In other words, the categories of gender, referred to as sex roles, are socially constructed and internalised by women and men. The second tendency takes the categories 'women' and 'men' as given and instead 'focuses on the relations of power and exploitation between them' (ibid.). Both of these accounts

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[1] For instance, Kendall and McDougall note that Bazalgette offered her critique of the term media literacy at the European Congress of Media Education Practitioners and yet a year later convened an international Media Literacy Conference in London (2012: 2).

are problematic for Connell in terms of adequately theorising gender. In one case, gender roles are socially determined from the outside with no consideration for how changes in these roles arise 'within gender relations themselves' (1985: 263). In the other, though relations are taken into account, there is a habit of what Connell calls categorical thinking: the categories of 'women' and 'men' are taken as given and there is no further examination of how women and men 'come to be what they are' (ibid.). This type of categoricalism has often led towards a biological determinism where categories are presumed to be natural and biological.[2] As a solution to these concerns, Connell advances a practice-based theory of gender which centres 'on the practices that constitute gender categories' (1985: 260). Through the analysis of practices such as those of labour, power and sexuality we can produce a more comprehensive conceptual framework of gender (one which can explain why, for instance, some men become opponents of feminism for reasons other than their biology). This conceptualisation of gender is very much developed in the work of writers such as Judith Butler (1990) and Teresa de Lauretis (1989). Drawing on Foucault, both scholars argue that gender is itself a disciplinary technique. Butler conceives gender as a performance; gender is not something one has but rather something one does (1990). De Lauretis argues that media are 'technologies of gender' and that representations of gender are the products of these technologies (1989).

At its most basic, representation involves 'using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people' (Hall, 1997: 15). Of course the concept of representation is far more complex than this since, according to the constructionist approach, meanings are never stable or fixed but rather are created by different people and cultures. Stuart Hall explains:

> [R]epresentation involves making meaning by forging links between
> three different orders of things:...the world of things, people, events
> and experiences; the conceptual world – the mental concepts we carry

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[2] Connell offers examples of certain phrases such as 'male power' and 'male culture' to make the point clear. Not only does this type of language 'collapse together a rather heterogeneous group' but also reduces the liability of the male chauvinist (1985: 266). No longer is he responsible for his words and/or actions since all can be 'attributable to the general fatality of being male' (ibid.).

around in our heads; and the signs, arranged into languages, which 'stand for' or communicate these concepts. (1997: 61)

According to Hall, within the constructionist perspective there are two further theoretical approaches to explain representations: the semiotic approach and the discursive approach (ibid.). The semiotic approach relies on theories of linguistics and studies the use of signs in creating meanings whilst the discursive approach, as developed in the work of Foucault and some of his followers, focuses on how certain discourses produce knowledge (rather than meaning). Though some may argue that one of these perspectives is 'superior' to the other in understanding representations of gender I would rather make the point here that both approaches allow us different ways to analyse representations and the construction of meaning. My discussion of feminist media scholarship in section 1.2 describes how semiotic and Foucaultian approaches are applied to studies about representations of gender.

My focus in this research is mostly on representations of femininity and girls' responses to these representations; however, as indicated by the above discussion of gender, I acknowledge that gender needs to be defined and understood in relational terms. Keeping that in mind, I make some reference to representations of masculinity and the boys in the classrooms that I observed in order to provide a broader context (i.e. how the girls related to the boys). Despite these references, there is an obvious imbalance in this project's interest with femininity as opposed to masculinity. Nevertheless, although my focus is on femininity, I identify this research as centrally about gender and gender representation. The project's focus on how femininity is negotiated by these particular students is fundamentally related to gender representation (and studies of it in the Media Studies classroom). Some may find it problematic to focus on femininity in order to consider gender representation. However, we can see many other examples of those who claim to study representations of race or gender, for instance, focusing specifically on one racial or gender group (e.g. representations of African Americans) whilst excluding others (see Entman and Rojecki, 2001; Gill, 2007; Jiwani, 2006). Similarly, I have found value in closely examining a particular gender (and its related representations).

I refer to the female students involved in this project in a number of ways: as participants, as respondents and often as girls. The specific use of 'girl' in feminist work has been both celebrated and vilified. As Kearney explains, older feminists

often 'repudiate' the term 'girls' based on 'its association with men's infantilisation and subjugation of adult females' (2006: 5). However, Kearney rightly points out that 'many contemporary female youth have reclaimed girlhood as their primary identity, often using it as a site for initiating cultural and political action' (ibid.). My reference to the participants as girls is informed by an awareness that they identify themselves as girls rather than use any other label such as 'young women'.

Outline of Chapters

The dissertation is organised into six main chapters. Chapter one provides an extensive research context and justification for this project, which includes an historical review of the English and Welsh education system, a discussion of feminist media scholarship relevant to the research, and a theoretical exploration of the concept of experience. The review of the English and Welsh education system is for the specific benefit of readers unfamiliar with this schooling system as well as those unfamiliar with the structure of formal media education in England and Wales. In order to assess the adequacy of A-level Media Studies in covering gender representation it is also important in this first chapter to identify the many strands of feminist media scholarship which have sought to offer a more developed notion of representation. Given the significance placed on understanding experience in this research, I conclude the chapter with a discussion of how we might reintegrate previous exclusions of what constitutes experience for the purposes of this work.

Chapter two describes the methods used in the project, a combination of classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with educators and students. Theoretical considerations of methods based mostly on feminist educational scholarship are also outlined in this chapter followed by a detailed explanation of the data analysis process, including the coding framework developed to organise data into categories and larger themes. Supported by critical education scholarship from those such as Weiler (1988), I suggest a methodological approach which accounts for both the production and reproduction of gendered subjects in the Media Studies classroom.

Chapter three is the first of four chapters of findings. It highlights the factors which constrain the voice and autonomy of students and teachers in the classroom. These factors are mostly tied to the exam boards and the pressure faced by teachers to ensure students' success in the exam. For female students there may also be

limitations due to the mixed gender setting within the classroom, especially where production work is concerned.

Chapter four explores the Media Studies classroom as a constrained site for the development of a critical feminist pedagogy. Though a certain postfeminist sensibility continues to frame the views of many participants, it is also evident that the girls in this study became more aware of gender inequality through Media Studies lessons. This is most clear in their attitudes towards women's professional ambitions and the unequal division of domestic labour.

Chapter five considers how an over-emphasis on analysing women's physical representation in the Media Studies classes reinforces girls' articulations of self-esteem and authenticity as mainly connected to one's physical appearance. Despite their awareness of the intangibility of these constructed representations, students continue to desire and value the resulting 'look'. The definitions and analysis of gender in binary and heterosexist terms also reinforces a very limited conception of gender and gender representation.

Throughout these chapters, a number of suggestions and recommendations are provided for improving gender representation lessons and as a result students' critical thinking. However, there are much broader concerns regarding the current state of the English and Welsh education system which are responsible for many of the pressures and constraints faced by media education as a subject. I attempt in chapter six to situate Media Studies within the larger context of education and address how the implementation of changes within the subject is, in part, dependent on changes occurring in the education system at large.

Chapter 1
Research Context and Justification

1.1 Understanding the English and Welsh Education System, A-level Media Studies and Media Literacy

In order to explore young women's conceptions of media education and gender representation, it is important to understand the educational system through which students in England and Wales may encounter Media Studies.[3] This section outlines the education system and the function of the National Curriculum in England and Wales, followed by a review of the A-level Media Studies courses offered by each exam board and the specifications for teaching A-level Media Studies. To readers who are native to the UK (and England and Wales specifically) the following section may seem a rather general outline and is primarily for the benefit of potential readers who are unfamiliar with the English and Welsh education system. But this section also provides important context for what teachers (and students) can and cannot do (a point I return to in chapter 6). The section concludes with a more theoretical discussion of critical media literacy: the development of various models, its implementation in media education literature, and the purpose and intention of critical media literacy.

1.1.1 The English and Welsh Education System

In England and Wales, children between the ages of five to sixteen are required by law to attend full-time education. As of January 2010 there were approximately '8.1 million pupils' enrolled in all schools in England (DfE, 2010). Following the 1988 Education Reform Act, a National Curriculum was introduced in England and Wales which state schools are still required to follow until students reach the age of sixteen (Gillard, 2011). However, in 2007, a Green Paper released by the government entitled 'Raising Expectations' proposed that, 'from 2015, all

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[3] I have chosen to exclude Scotland and Northern Ireland from this summary as these nations administer their own (quite distinct) curricula from that of England and Wales (Bazalgette, 2007a).

young people should be required to participate in some form of education or training until they reach the age of 18' (Spielhofer et al., 2007: 1). Once students have completed five years of secondary education, they are eligible to take GCSE examinations (General Certificate of Secondary Education). The GCSE is a single-subject examination produced and assessed by independent examination boards. Though there is no upper or lower limit, students on average take between eight to ten GCSEs.[4] Upon completing their examinations, students have several options. They may leave schooling and enter the workforce, they may pursue certificates at vocational or technical colleges, or, for those wishing to attend university, they may register for an additional two years of secondary education (and sit the corresponding examinations) known as A-levels (Advanced-levels). Prior to the National Curriculum, the five years spent in secondary school were known as forms; however, this system was changed in the early 1990s and from primary school onwards each year has now been numbered consecutively. For example, A-levels can also be referred to as Year 12 and Year 13. Despite this change, the term 'sixth form' remains a common reference for the two years of A-levels, with Year 12 (or AS: Advanced Subsidiary) known as 'lower sixth' and Year 13 (or A2) as 'upper sixth'. Though many secondary schools still offer A-levels, there are also further education colleges (FE colleges) throughout the country, which only offer A-level courses.

Another more controversial and political change to the secondary school system was the replacement of the Tripartite System with the Comprehensive System in the 1960s. The Tripartite System (also more generally known as a selective system) was the official structure of state funded, secondary education in England from 1944 until the mid 1960s. Under the Tripartite System, three forms of secondary schooling were available to students: grammar schools, secondary modern schools and technical schools (though few technical schools were ever developed and for this reason the system is often referred to as bipartite). Grammar schools were considered the most academic and prepared students for higher education

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[4] Though more recently some have argued that students are being encouraged to sit an excessive number of GCSEs so that their schools can climb league tables and there have been recommendations that in order to improve the overall quality of learning there should be an upper limit of GCSEs which a student can sit (Hills, 2012).

whilst secondary modern schools focused on developing vocational skills to prepare children for a career in trades. The technical schools were meant to provide students with engineering and science skills to serve in specific trades, however, as mentioned earlier these schools barely materialised; fewer than five percent of children ever attended a technical school. In order to gain entrance to a grammar school, students had to pass the 11 plus exam – an examination which commonly tested writing, arithmetic and general problem solving skills. The 11 plus exam was – and in some cases still is – administered at the age of eleven, when students are near the completion of elementary schooling. Those who failed the exam were sent to secondary modern schools. The Tripartite System was heavily supported by the conservative government because they saw it as providing a system that recognised the different needs of children of varying abilities. However, by the 1950s Labour politicians and left educationalists became increasingly concerned that the 11 plus exam was reinforcing class distinctions, because students at secondary modern schools were receiving a poorer education and were branded as 'failures'.[5]

By 1964, the new Labour government had ordered Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to develop plans for phasing out grammar schools and secondary moderns, and replacing them with the Comprehensive System. Although the process began the following year, timelines had been left to the LEAs and, as a result, shifts were made quickly in Labour controlled counties whilst Conservative counties progressed either slowly or not at all. Thus the majority of phasing out did not occur till the 1970s. The Comprehensive system, which is still in place today, was created in an effort to provide an equal and high standard of secondary education to all children, regardless of social class or ability. However, the extent to which comprehensives are achieving these goals is still highly debated.[6] The majority of secondary schools in England are now comprehensives, but there still remain 164

[5] It was also argued that the 11 plus exam was biased in favor of middle and upper class students, through the use of certain language and terms which would have been unfamiliar to children from working class backgrounds.

[6] For instance, some research has shown that students attending grammar schools out-perform comprehensive students on exams (whilst other research has shown that results are not significantly better in areas with grammar schools) (Gillard, 2008) .

grammar schools which were never phased out, mostly located in Kent, Lincolnshire, Buckinghamshire and North Yorkshire. Entry to these schools not only requires candidates to sit and pass the 11 plus exam, but they must also achieve an 'A' grade (in some more selective sites, only candidates who achieve the highest 'A' grades are granted entry). Though, for the most part, the Comprehensive System has been adopted as the norm, there is ongoing debate over the benefits of a more selective school system.[7] It is with this debate in mind that the current study includes three educational institutions from across the system: a comprehensive secondary school, a grammar secondary school, and an FE college (a more detailed profile of each institution is provided in chapter 2). Though these differences may result in quite varied Media Studies classes, it is relevant to consider how these differences may also play a role in the way that young women come to understand how the media represent gender, and how students view the development of their own media learning.

The third and most recent major change in the English and Welsh education system was the shift to a National Curriculum as a result of the 1988 Education Reform Act. The National Curriculum was based on the idea of standardising education across the country. It set out a number of key stages which included attainment targets that children in maintained schools were expected to meet by the end of each key stage. Gillard (2011) notes that the National Curriculum was part of the many educational reforms during the 1980s which attempted to 'reduce the influence of teachers in curriculum development'. The Curriculum itself was written by a 'government quango'[8] and teachers had little to no say in its construction or design (ibid.). In theory, the idea of developing a universal curriculum based on 'the principle of entitlement' could be seen as a shift towards a more democratic education system (Bazalgette, 2007b: 7).[9] In practice, however, the implementation

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[7] For a more developed account of the Comprehensive system see Pring et al. (2006).

[8] A 'quango' is a 'quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation'.

[9] According to Bazalgette, the principle of entitlement means 'that we need to think about education in terms of what all children should have the right to expect, not in terms of imposing restrictive and utilitarian requirements' (2007b: 7).

of the National Curriculum and the administration of tests at the end of each key stage led to a number of undesirable outcomes for schools and teachers. Test results, for example, were published in 'league tables' which (at least theoretically) allowed parents to choose where to send their children. Teachers and schools were demoted from 'curriculum innovators' to 'curriculum deliverers' and the curriculum eventually 'became skewed by the need to [prepare and] practise for the tests' (Gillard, 2011).

The adoption of a National Curriculum standardised core subjects such as maths, science and English across schools which allowed for comparable assessment nation-wide. With this standardisation, however, came a decline of available space for subjects such as media education at the primary (5-11) and secondary (11-16) levels. '[Although] education about the media…remains a marginal aspect of the compulsory curriculum and is rarely found in primary schools' there have been attempts to incorporate media as an element within other subjects of the National Curriculum such as English and art (Buckingham, 2005: 3). Today, as outlined by the specification for 14-16 English, all students are expected to analyse a media text. Whilst media education has declined within the younger age ranges, the diversity of qualifications from the 16 to 19 age group has increased dramatically. In 2011, 33,855 students – approximately four percent of the total number of students – sat for Advanced Level examinations in media, film and television studies[10] across the UK (JCQ, 2011). The majority of these students were female (18,309).

This section has offered a brief summary of some of the key historical shifts within the English and Welsh education system. As I explain below, A-levels (and consequently A-level Media Studies) are not governed by the National Curriculum (see section 1.1.3). Yet, it is still important to understand what implications the education system has for this research especially given the discussions in chapters 3 and 6 about the (problematic) examinations system – a system which Jones notes is embedded 'at the consensual centre of English schooling' (2003: 141).

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[10] The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) combines data for these subjects into a single category.

1.1.2 Media Education in England and Wales Today

The framework implemented in most English and Welsh media education curricula today is organized into four key concepts: language, representation, industry and audience (Buckingham, 2005: 12). Language modules explain how to decipher meaning from the structure of various media such as television and online content. The representation module – which is the main focus of this project – involves teaching students about 'the ways in which ideas and values or specific groups or types of people are constructed in media texts' (Stafford, 2001). The stereotyping which takes place on television is one key aspect of representation often addressed in the classroom. The industry module concentrates on 'the organisation of media production and issues of ownership and control over communication' (ibid.). Identifying the producers of a text and the purpose behind producing texts are two key areas of focus within this concept. The final dimension of media education describes the audience in relation 'to the awareness of one's own and others' responses to, and readings of, the media' (Buckingham, 2005: 18).

It should be noted that these concepts of language, representation, industry and audience are much more complex than the general summaries I have provided here.[11] Also important to note is that not all schools apply these exact concepts in equal measure within their syllabus. Other topics, such as genre, narrative and ideology are sometimes included as key concepts, either within modules such as representation, or independently. As creative media production is viewed as a key component of media education, most media-related subjects involve a practical component, requiring students to produce a media text of their choice. This is especially the case in schools with a vocational emphasis, where practical modules provide students with the required skills for a career in a specific media industry. Regardless of what is included or excluded from the syllabi for Media Studies, one of the main aims of media education is to enhance students' critical abilities. At A-

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[11] A more scholarly definition of representation was provided at the beginning of this thesis in the introduction and I turn to an historical tracing of literature about gender representation in the following section of this chapter (1.2). The question these other more developed discussions raise for this research is the extent to which the teaching observed is aligned with these more academic accounts of representation and representation of gender specifically.

levels, the development of students' critical autonomy is especially emphasised by exam boards,[12] whilst teachers also aim to cover the required material according to exam board specifications.

Though 'media education is a dimension of mother tongue language teaching ("subject English") throughout the secondary school', it is only at the GCSE and A-levels when entire courses and modules dedicated to the study of media are provided (Buckingham, 2010: 1). The scope of this research has been further narrowed to an exploration of A-level media education due to the intense analytical element of the curriculum, where issues such as gender representation are often examined and discussed at a more in-depth level than elsewhere in the secondary education system. During A-levels, students are provided with opportunities to engage in a critical analysis of various media texts, and to discuss at length the different representations included in these texts. They are also encouraged to consider why certain stereotypical representations exist, and to reflect on the consequences of such stereotypes in society. For female students in particular, their experiences in A-level media education are an important stage in developing their understanding and awareness of feminine identity as portrayed by media, and as such, a relevant moment to capture through academic research and inquiry – though, as I shall discuss in section 1.1.5, this may not be the first time female students have encountered ideas about media and gender representation. The following sections outline the A-level specifications for Media Studies, its implementation in sixth form and the coverage of gender representation.

1.1.3 Advanced-Level Media Studies

Currently in England and Wales, there are four exam boards which provide qualifications for A-levels. They are the AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance), Edexcel, OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society for the Arts, or,

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[12] For example, the AQA Media Studies specification notes that the course 'must enable candidates to develop enquiry, *critical thinking* and decision-making skills' as well as 'develop their appreciation and *critical understanding* of the media' (2010: 7, emphasis my own). The AQA mark scheme for A-level Media Studies examinations asks examiners to assess candidates' 'critical autonomy' (2012). The WJEC Media Studies specification claims that it 'is designed to allow media students to draw on their existing experience of the media and to

RSA) and WJEC (Welsh Joint Education Committee).[13] These exam boards were originally governed by major universities but have merged into large (non-profit) organisations 'who effectively compete to provide schools with examination specifications, and to administer and mark the examinations' (Bazalgette, 2007b: 4). Each exam board produces and issues their own specification for A-level Media Studies which undergoes regular revision. The specifications focus in large part on the exam content students will encounter during formal assessments. Educators then divide the units covered in the exams into course material to be addressed throughout the academic year. In some cases, the exam boards provide teaching guides to assist departments in developing relevant content and examples to use in the classroom. The OCR exam board in particular provides an extremely detailed account of the content to address within each unit. Aside from this exception, as A-level Media Studies is not considered part of the National Curriculum, educators are given considerable freedom in creating the syllabi and selecting appropriate texts for study.[14]

Despite the exclusion of A-level Media Studies from the National Curriculum, there are a number of bodies that have a role in shaping the curriculum for primary and secondary media education in England and (more broadly) the UK. Among them are: the British Film Institute (BFI), Film Education, the English and Media Centre, the (now abolished) Regional Screen Agencies and a number of regulatory agencies responsible for imposing standard requirements for A-level specifications.

The British Film Institute (BFI) is a charity governed by a Royal Charter. They carry out a number of functions pursuant to 'the development of the arts of film, television, and the moving image throughout [the] United Kingdom' (BFI

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develop their abilities to *respond critically* to the media' (2009: 6, emphasis my own).

[13] Excluding the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) board based in Northern Ireland.

[14] As reported by one A-level Media Studies teacher involved in this research (Ms Farooq – see chapter 2), texts and readings are often selected based on the educator's own areas of expertise, similar to the flexibility university lecturers are granted in developing their module content.

Royal Charter, 2000: 2). In addition to awarding funding for film production and distribution, the BFI also provides a number of educational resources for those engaged in film and media education. Film Education is a charity supported by the UK Film Industry. They are focused particularly on the provision of 'award-winning teaching resources, teacher training and cinema based events which support the use of film within the curriculum' (Film Education Website). The English and Media Centre (EMC) is a not-for-profit trust with a primary interest in publications and teaching resources for teachers and students of English (integrating language, literature and media). The EMC creates a wealth of teaching resources and training courses in conjunction with exam board specifications and the National Curriculum to ensure that their resources fulfil the required learning outcomes. Though now abolished, there were a number of screen agencies across the UK with the aim of 'encouraging public access to film culture and building vibrant and sustainable media sectors across Great Britain' (Creative Skillset, n.d.). They were mostly funded by the UK Film Council and worked closely with industry content providers and cultural sector providers within their geographic region (ibid.). Since their abolishment, they have been replaced by the Creative England agency.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA, originally: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, or, QCA) was a branch of the Department for Education and was responsible for the development and maintenance of the National Curriculum (and its corresponding assessments). As a part of the Government's wider educational reforms, however, the QCDA was closed on March 31st, 2012 and replaced by two separate executive agencies: the Standards and Testing Agency (STA) and the Teaching Agency (DfE, 2012a). Regulatory functions relating to examination and assessment boards (including GCSE and A-levels) have been transferred to the independent regulator, Ofqual (the Office of Qualifications and Examinations regulation). In chapter 3 I return to these agencies and discuss their more specific role in the teaching and assessment of A-level Media Studies. In particular, section 3.3 identifies how recommendations to increase the level of practical production in the syllabus is constrained by the institutional context of A-level study.

Based on the variability of A-level Media Studies syllabi, it is difficult to predict the exact structure of content and method of delivery in each college.

Additionally, the specifications do not always provide a complete review of concepts covered in the courses. For example, despite the slight references to gender in the specifications, the teachers involved in this research who are responsible for the delivery of A-level Media Studies courses reported a frequent and in-depth address of gender issues within lesson plans. When deciding on the most relevant stages for conducting fieldwork in the Media Studies classrooms, it is essential to be not only familiar with the exam board specification followed by each college, but also to have a sufficient understanding of the individual curriculum developed by the instructors. It is with this in mind that the following section turns to a review of both exam board specifications and reports from teachers regarding A-level Media Studies.

1.1.4 In Theory and In Practice

From a review of the specifications, it is evident that exam boards attempt to create a balance between media theory and production. The AQA, OCR and WJEC boards all divide the course into four units which are taught and assessed over a period of two years. Two units focus largely on students creating a media portfolio, text or artefact which is then assessed based on the theoretical material that is covered in the other two units. The Edexcel specification, in contrast, divides the course into six core units, five of which focus on production elements of media education. This is further illustrated in their outline of key aims, which includes goals such as 'develop[ing] a broad understanding…of, and skills in media applied within a work-related, client-orientated context' (Edexcel, 2009: 4). Though much of the specification is based on practical aspects of media education, there is the suggestion that through 'experimentation in a range of media' students will be able to 'explore how meaning is created and communicated' (ibid.).

Many of the debates in the British media education literature relate to the role of practical media production in promoting critical thinking (see Buckingham, Grahame & Sefton-Green, 1995). Whilst it may be true that through the creation of media artefacts comes greater understanding and awareness, this particular project has decided not to include media practice as a primary focus in researching the development of young female students' critical abilities.[15] This decision is not meant

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[15] Though not a primary focus in this project, practical work was sometimes discussed by teachers and students during interviews or was the focus of

to deny the value of practical work in the development of critical understanding but rather to maintain a focus on the classroom-based lessons and practices where teachers attempt to engage students in theoretical and conceptual debates. A number of concerns have been raised in the past about the limitations of classroom-based content (see Buckingham et al., 1995). Making media has often been conceived as a response to these very concerns and yet, as will be discussed in this project, educators continue to rely (primarily) on methods of textual analysis in teaching about representation. I approach this debate between theory and praxis with the view that media production cannot be the only solution to concerns with classroom-based content. As Buckingham puts it, 'critical understanding does not follow automatically from the experience of creative production' (2010: 11). If reforms to the curriculum are deemed necessary, they cannot solely involve a greater degree of practical work but should consider how lessons focusing on theory can be improved and how we might develop opportunities that allow learners to step back from the immediate experience of creative production to reflect and to analyse 'the broader economic, social and cultural dimensions of media' (ibid.). In other words, I am interested specifically in how media literacy is cultivated by classroom content (as opposed to media production) in an effort to address how these lessons operate as a key source of both challenge and insight.

1.1.5 Reference to Gender

At the beginning of this document, I noted that A-level Media Studies is one of the few institutionalised spaces where students are engaged in an analysis of the relationship between gender and media. That is not to say the A-level Media Studies classroom is the only space in formal education where students discuss gender representation. Students are likely to encounter some formalised discussions around gender and media well before they reach A-level. Mandatory citizenship classes and PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) classes in England for eleven to sixteen year olds are known to address gender and media (though rather sparingly) as

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observed lessons. In some of these cases, students did attempt to put into practice ideas they had encountered during the gender representation lessons and I have incorporated this material into later chapters of findings.

are English courses, which often contain elements of media education.[16] The problem here in knowing the exact depth to which these topics are addressed in other subjects is related to the lack of knowledge about how media education generally is implemented (Buckingham, 2003). As Buckingham writes, 'there are identifiable elements of media education within the curriculum documents for areas such as History and Modern Languages, and most prominently within English – although whether and how such proposals are carried out in practice remains an open question' (ibid.: 89). Even within A-levels, other courses such as sociology teach students about gender and feminism. My argument here is that, contrary to these other spaces, A-level Media Studies offers students a sustained period of lessons and analysis related to the politics of representation (and gender representation specifically) as an area of focus within the curriculum. Though courses in citizenship, English and sociology may take up gender and perhaps even gender representation as supplementary teaching concepts, Media Studies takes media as the starting point for these lessons and, at A-level, teachers expect students to approach these mediated relationships in a much more insightful and academically rigorous manner than in years prior.

As mentioned earlier, references to teaching about gender representation are not made explicit or identified as compulsory content within the Media Studies specifications. Out of all the key units covered (such as audience, language, and industry) gender is most often cited as a component within the representation unit. For instance, the AQA specification notes that during the second year of A-levels, gender is considered a concept that students may learn about within a politics and media section of the course, which falls under the larger umbrella heading of 'Representation in the Media' (AQA, 2010: 16). Still, there is an implication that learning about gender is not a compulsory requirement, and is suggested alongside other topics such as class, ethnicity and age (ibid.). By contrast, the OCR and WJEC specifications clearly state that students require knowledge of gender representation.

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[16] As one of the teachers involved in this study (Ms Farooq – see chapter 2) explained, subjects such as Citizenship and PSHE 'are designed to talk about social issues' and as such 'issues of gender will have been discussed in terms of how students deal with them personally as opposed to learn about them theoretically'.

The OCR provides a teaching guide containing suggested lessons to introduce students to gender issues. For instance, one suggested teaching activity recommends that students examine the portrayal of female characters in videogames, and consider how the characters are represented, and the extent to which they challenge traditional gender representations (OCR, 2009: 48).

The other key units relating to industry, audience and language do not suggest gender as a relevant area of focus within the specifications. Yet most of the participating educators for A-level Media Studies have reported that gender is a topic which is often discussed throughout the course.[17] Due to the variability in the concentration on gender within these other key units, this project has chosen to focus on gender representation as it is the most consistently covered gender-related issue across A-level Media Studies.

1.1.6 The Literacy Metaphor

The meaning of media literacy, despite the term's long history, remains highly contested by educators, scholars and policy-makers. As many academics have discussed in the past (see Buckingham, 1993; Burn & Durran, 2007; Kress, 2003; Messaris, 1994), the print literacy analogy, whilst helpful in some ways, also raises several questions. Do all forms of media embody a language which resembles the fixity of written language? Is there only a single literacy which can be acquired and applied to the range of available media? To what extent does one have to learn this literacy in the same way one learns to read and write a specific language? These questions and others have received further consideration elsewhere, resulting in several models of media literacy. One of the earliest models was established by OFCOM, the UK's media super-regulator, who published a consultation paper with a working definition of media literacy as having 'the ability to *access*, *understand* and *create* communications in a variety of contexts' (Buckingham, 2005: 3,

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[17] During a phone interview with an A-level Media Studies educator (Ms Farooq), gender was a concept she noted as appearing in nearly eighty percent of the entire course – either as a formal and planned topic, or through indirect ways, such as during textual analyses and similar activities in the classroom. Another teacher (Ms Smith) explained that whilst gender is mentioned and studied within other key concepts (such as audiences) it is given most attention and focus during the representation unit.

emphasis added). This three-part model was the first policy commitment towards media literacy, and as such an important step in laying the groundwork for future discussion and debate. The OFCOM model has come under some more recent criticism, however, from Burn and Durran, who note that:

> In their policy paper on media literacy (OFCOM, 2005) there is a recurrent emphasis on the function of digital media to provide information, and a corresponding neglect of functions such as narrative, fantasy, roleplay, social networking, which are arguably the functions most important to young people...By the same token, the emphasis on information erodes the cultural aspects of media literacy: the word 'culture' appears nowhere in this paper. (2007: 7)

Burn and Durran's observations are especially relevant to this research, which focuses on young women and their critical media literacy. As such it would seem important to apply a model which accounts for those functions and aspects most valuable to the research participants. A more current and appropriate model of media literacy adopted by Burn and Durran, initially developed by the Media Literacy Task Force in the UK (represented by the UK Film Council, the British Film Institute, Channel Four Television and the BBC) and aligned with an emerging Europe-wide consensus, is the '3-Cs' model of media literacy: cultural, creative, and critical (Burn & Durran, 2007: 11). Described as social functions, Burn and Durran consider the '3-Cs' as central to the media literacy model. The cultural function of media literacy relates to the cultural practices in which we engage. They highlight the development of identity and sense of self as the key purpose of cultural practices, especially for young people, for it is through 'engagement with the media as part of wider cultural complexes of taste, pleasure and critical engagement, [that] social identities are built and negotiated' (2007: 12). For instance the young women participating in this study, as I discuss in later chapters, negotiate their identity based on their understanding and interaction with various cultural practices, and distribute their identity through their 'cultural world and its other inhabitants' (ibid.).

Departing from more traditional thinking, Burn and Durran place the creative function of media literacy before the critical function. They believe it is through creating media texts that young people develop a critical understanding of the media. Traditionally, due to the evolution of media education from literary studies, a purely analytical discipline, theory was given priority over practice (in many cases, creative production was completely absent from the curriculum). Today there is a greater

appreciation for the value of creating media texts, though tension still exists between analytical work and production work (and which should inform the other). Rather than attempt to place the creative and critical in some chronological order, it seems more helpful and accurate to acknowledge the symbiotic relationship between theory and practice, whereby both processes inform and develop the other. As Goldfarb (2002) explains:

> ...learning to take apart media texts provides students with ideas about how to compose their own texts. In the process, intellectual skills associated with a range of disciplines become an integral part of learning the "technical skills" needed to compose one's own media. Likewise, technical processes...become points of focus in students' critical readings of their studies in more typically academic areas. Texts are no longer regarded as fixed products. Rather, students learn to see them as moments in a process of meaning production – a process that neither begins nor ends in their reading of a text. (74-75)

As addressed earlier, the focus of this research is not on the creative functions of media education and more specifically with respect to gender representation. It is, however, worthwhile to note the relationship between the creative and the critical and, as the above states, the 'process of meaning production' which occurs through both the analytical and the practical aspects of media education (ibid). This is given further consideration in relation to the students' involved in this study in chapter 3.

The final social function outlined in the '3-Cs' media literacy model is the critical function, the focus of this research. Though all four exam boards highlight critical awareness as a key learning outcome within A-level Media Studies, there is no real definition or further consideration in the specifications of what this critical awareness may involve. Therefore in order to understand the meaning of critical awareness or critical literacy,[18] we must first understand how this term has been defined by academics in the past. In the UK, as Buckingham (1998) notes, 'the most commonly quoted starting point in [the] history [of media education] is the work of

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[18] There are several variants of the term critical literacy used synonymously throughout policy documents and academic work, such as critical understanding, critical engagement, critical awareness and so on. Though each implies a slightly varied meaning what seems most important for the context of this research is the presence of 'critical' within these terms, implying an investigative, analytical element to the skill being developed (I offer a more developed understanding of the term critical below). In this document, these phrases are used interchangeably.

F.R. Leavis and his student Denys Thompson' (33).[19] Leavis and Thompson's book, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (1933), was the first to propose a number of classroom exercises for educators who taught about media in schools. In an effort to preserve the literary heritage of the nation, students were taught to resist and discriminate popular culture – they were inoculated against what was considered the corruptive mass media. Subsequent to this, from the late 1950s and early 1960s, was the advent of the British cultural studies tradition. Key figures such as Williams (1961) and Hoggart (1959) sought to move beyond Leavis' notion of culture as 'a fixed set of privileged artefacts' and instead viewed cultural expression in many forms – from that of the working classes to that of mass produced entertainment such as Hollywood cinema (in Buckingham, 1998: 34). This more pluralist conception of culture was disseminated to teachers through a number of official reports and famously through Hall and Whannel's (1964) *The Popular Arts*. Yet, as Buckingham notes, despite the progressive nature of this approach a (problematic) cultural distinction remained where (auteurist) film was valorised over television in classroom discussions (1998: 34-35). The third movement in critical literacy was derived from screen theory in the 1970s, and later developed into a school-based practice by Masterman. Students were encouraged to employ semiotic methods of analysis to identify objectively the ideological messages within media texts, resulting in liberation from their influence, a process known as demystification (Masterman, 1985).

Tracing the evolution of critical media literacy reveals two tensions, as identified by Buckingham. On one hand, critical media literacy can be viewed as a positive move towards democratization. In this case students' cultures are validated within the curriculum, representing 'a direct challenge to the hegemony of elite

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[19] This historical tracing of critical literacy has been described previously by Buckingham (1998) as a general history of media education in the UK. My discussion until now has drawn from those who actually use the term 'media literacy' in their work but here I am for the first time in this section applying the concept of critical media literacy retrospectively to the work of others. This is done in part to remain consistent with my earlier description of what is called the 3-Cs model of media *literacy* (rather than the 3-Cs model of media *education*) but is also done to make the point that these historical shifts are of particular relevance to how we understand what it means to be (and to teach to be) critical of media.

literary culture' (Buckingham, 1998: 36). On the other hand, the evolution of media education also demonstrates defensiveness, a need for teachers to protect vulnerable students against the manipulation of mass media. Certainly this bears some consideration, for if all students were capable of automatically reading texts in critical ways, there would be no need for media education, or for any debate 'about the power of media messages and the media industries' (Burn and Durran, 2007: 14). However, as the cultural studies tradition has convincingly argued, audiences are capable of producing their own meanings and should not be considered the 'passive dupes' sometimes assumed by earlier scholars and educators (see Fiske, 1989; Hall, 1980).

What, then, should be the purpose and role of critical media literacy – to democratise or to defend? Rather than attempt to argue from a particular side of this debate, I find it most useful to approach critical media literacy from a balanced perspective, as other scholars and educators have in the recent past (see Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2004; Burn and Durran, 2007). Buckingham and Sefton-Green's work most clearly demonstrates this approach, framed through the sociological opposition of structure and agency (2004). Their research project on children's engagement with the Pokémon franchise produced evidence that children's identities, beliefs and behaviour are not always 'determined by structures of political and economic power, ideology, language or history', nor are children always able to read critically through 'persuasive sales techniques built into this franchise, or its representations of childhood, culture and ethnicity' (in Burn and Durran, 2007: 14). They conclude that critical readings should avoid attempts to police meaning or taste, and instead open them to debate (ibid.).

Within this research project, critical media literacy is conceived in the same manner. Teaching A-level students about gender representation should not represent an effort to inoculate them against misrepresentations of men and women. On the other hand, educators should not assume that students already possess all the necessary tools to analyse representations critically. Instead, students should be developing their critical understanding of gender representation through various lessons and practices, be it through conducting textual analysis, independent research or creating their own texts. This study provides not only an evaluation of how critical literacy skills towards gender representation are developed through these

practices, but more importantly, what female students subjectively experience based on these efforts to enhance their critical abilities. As this project is particularly concerned with providing an account of voices and experiences that are often marginalised it is of utmost importance that the girls' experiences are given priority in this way.

1.1.7 Criticality in Media Education: Promising or Perilous?

The above historical tracing of the developments of understandings of what some scholars are calling media literacy in formal education raises the question of what is meant by the term 'critical'. In his analysis of critical social science (CSS), Andrew Sayer provides a relevant discussion that can inform our understanding of the term. He notes that earlier versions of CSS in the 1970s that attempted to liberate people from oppression were criticised heavily for their 'lack of sensitivity to difference' (2009: 767-768). In other words, the general well-being of various populations (for example, women) was defined through a narrow and simplistic set of perspectives that excluded many (ibid.: 768). As a result, CSS today has shied away from making any kind of normative claims around social practices and instead focuses on critiques of 'existing academic ideas...coupled with a concern to be reflexive' (ibid.). In order to develop a clear and precise understanding of what we mean by the term 'critical', Sayer argues that we need to make explicit our 'conception of the good' which consequently requires a 'consideration of ethics and well-being' (ibid.: 769). 'Good' or 'well-being' are defined from the standpoint of that which extends human flourishing (and, by implication, that which reduces suffering). Feminism, for example, offers many critiques of existing gender orders by identifying reasons why certain behaviours are bad. These acts are labelled as bad because of the ways in which gender orders cause 'suffering, unhappiness and restricted flourishing' (Sayer, 2011: 243). Therefore, in order to be critical of anything, we need some conception of what causes human flourishing and suffering as well as being reflexive about our own standpoints as researchers.[20]

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[20] Sayer suggests that *the capabilities approach* developed in the work of Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) offers a way to conceive well-being that is objectivist in one sense but vague enough to allow for cultural adaption and interpretation so as to avoid the excessively narrow perspectives of earlier definitions of well-being (2011: 233). However, his clarification of what 'critical' may mean is not

By extension, critical media literacy is not only about students being reflexive about their media use (though an important goal in itself). Rather, to be critically media literate means also being able to evaluate media against some conception of good and bad. For example, in order to be critical of certain representations that are sexist, racist, homophobic, ethnocentric, or prejudiced in some way, we must recognise that these representations are problematic because of their ability to restrict the flourishing of certain marginalised groups of people.[21] Such a conception is compatible with and indeed helps to clarify the ultimate goals of what is often termed ideology [22] critique: the process of analysing and understanding 'how certain dominant ideologies, uncritically accepted, are embedded in everyday situations and practices' (Brookfield, 1995: 87). Ideology critique is often cited as the foundation of certain models of critical media literacy (see Kellner and Share, 2005).

Still problematic, though, is how we identify critical learning when we see it in the Media Studies classroom. Academics engaged in educational studies have long been struggling to conceptualise 'critical pedagogy' in contemporary schooling and the problems of critical pedagogy for media education in particular have received sustained attention from scholars over the past thirty years. Critical (also

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necessarily dependent on acceptance of the capabilities approach, and is compatible with a wide range of perspectives.

[21] Of course the process of identifying which representations restrict and which extend flourishing is far more complex than this. The reclamation or subversion of certain stereotypically sexist representations as ironic and playful add further complexity to the matter of determining how images should be read and 'remains a central tension in the field' of gender and media studies (Gill, 2007: 13).

[22] The term ideology itself has a number of specific (and tortured) meanings in critical social science and media studies and comes from a long tradition of Marxist scholarship. Ideology can be defined broadly as a 'set of values, beliefs, myths, explanations and justifications that appear to the majority to be self-evidently true and morally desirable' (Brookfield, 1995: 87). As Gill notes, Marx's theory of ideology was intensely debated throughout the twentieth century by a number of writers and theorists including the Frankfurt School, Althusser, Hoggart, Williams as well as a number of Lacanian psychoanalysts (2007: 55). It is, however, the work of Gramsci and his notion of hegemony that Gill credits as most influential in 'today's ideological media critique' (ibid.).

known as 'radical') pedagogues from the US such as Giroux and McLaren have consistently looked to media education as 'a practice that will enable them to fulfil their theoretical claims' (Buckingham, 1996: 628). The theoretical claims of critical pedagogy are many but, for the purposes of this work, it would be sufficient to identify their central goal which 'has been to unite different forms of political struggle, and...different theoretical perspectives, into an overarching synthesis' (ibid. 629). Though a seemingly admirable goal broadly shared by media educators (who would disagree with wanting to liberate and empower others?), certain (often feminist) responses to critical pedagogy have raised very many key questions about groups of students who are further marginalised and silenced by critical discourse(s).

An early feminist critique of radical pedagogy (in specific relation to media education) can be found in Judith Williamson's article 'How does Girl Number Twenty understand ideology?' (1981/2). Here Williamson shares with us her failed attempt to empower girls in her class (and a girl named Astrid in particular) through an analysis of media representations of women. What Williamson comes to understand is that students learn to play a kind of language game in the classroom rather than experience a real change in attitude. Boys provide anti-sexist comments about representations of women (which they know teachers reward) all the while criticising the 'dumb' girls who enjoy the texts containing those very representations (Williamson, 1981/2: 81). The problems with teaching ideology do not only involve concerns with students 'faking' their critical development (and subsequently judging those who enjoy some media forms) but also with the lack of willingness for students like Astrid to participate in classroom discussions. Following Williamson's article, several feminist scholars engaged with media education have voiced similar anxieties about teaching the concept of ideology. Turnbull (1998) addresses how female students are further silenced by critical discourses and that the efforts of teachers to 'give' students a voice can often represent a denial of students' already existing voice(s). Perhaps, according to Turnbull and others (see Ellsworth, 1989; Orner, 1992), students actively choose to remain silent for legitimate reasons. Ellsworth points out that there is a 'fiction of the silence of subordinated groups' which implies that these individuals are 'voiceless' (1989: 313). The reality of their silence, according to Ellsworth, is based on their 'assessment of the power relations and safety of the situation' (ibid.). For Turnbull, a key reason for remaining silent is

because students fear having to deny their pleasure in media texts and 'assume a pose of critical self-consciousness...rewarded by' their teacher (1998: 102). I return to the notion of women's pleasure in media texts in the following section as this has been a key site of challenge in feminist media scholarship.

Buckingham (1996) has written at considerable length about the potential dangers of reinforcing existing relations of power and authority in the name of developing students' 'critical' capacities. As he has noted, there is 'a danger that "being critical" becomes one of the standardised routines or language games of the media classroom – a game in which students simply give back to the teacher the forms of critical discourse they have been fed' (the problem with which Williamson and others have struggled) (Buckingham, 2010: 10). Instead of a focus on criticality in media education, Buckingham calls for an emphasis on 'media learning' (1990). He explains that media learning 'is premised on the need for a dynamic and reflexive relationship between the social, affective and cognitive dimensions of media education, and on the dialectical relationship between media analysis and media production' (1996: 645). Yet, in more recent times, Buckingham has articulated a renewed interest in criticality. For instance he notes that in order to promote civic participation among 'disaffected and disadvantaged young people...they need to develop relatively traditional skills in locating and evaluating information, constructing arguments and *thinking critically...*' (2010: 9, emphasis my own). In terms of media education specifically Buckingham has identified three main obstacles which currently 'undermine the potential of media literacy to be taught as a kind of critical thinking' (in Kendall and McDougall, 2012: 2). Briefly, these obstacles are: 'the move to "digital literacy"[,]...the media studies 2.0 intervention...and the renewed interest of media educators in the "literacy brigade"' (ibid.). Though each of these developments could be discussed in much greater detail, it is perhaps sufficient to say here that the educational response to these obstacles in Buckingham's view has been an uncritical celebration of technology (ibid.). Based in part on Buckingham's analysis Kendall and McDougall call for 'a sharper focus on the objectives of critical media literacy in the twenty-first century' – a point to which I will return shortly (ibid.).

What we can deduce from these conflicting discussions is that, despite the earlier (and in some spaces, continued) criticisms of critical discourse, there is an

implicit acceptance of critical media literacy as an implied goal of media education and as a consequence a continued focus on how best to conceive and improve the acquisition of 'critical media literacy'. In some instances this has been promoted through a greater inclusion of media practice in classrooms and in other instances by an increase in extra-curricular and informal media education initiatives. As mentioned earlier nearly all exam board specifications for A-level Media Studies cite some form of critical autonomy as a key learning objective. Problematic or not, the rhetoric of critical pedagogy continues to be of central importance in discussions of media education. Even outside scholarly debates, 'critical' has become a part of our everyday language; any attempt to abandon its use at this late stage seems futile. Instead, we might consider how the nature of critical discourse in media education has changed since the earlier critiques of Buckingham and others and how we might understand the experiences of certain marginalised groups such as young female students in relation to the efforts of educators to improve criticality. Has there been a rethinking of what critical media education might look like and, if so, how do we know when we have found it?

Trying to answer this question with a singular definition from my perspective would simply be another iteration of an individual with authority (in this case, the researcher) attempting to dictate to others what critical learning 'looks like' in the media classroom. What I have instead tried to do throughout this work is narrate the many moments I have observed in the classroom, identifying the potential opportunities for developing criticality. A common critique of radical pedagogues revolves around the excessively theoretical nature of their work and the lack of practical offerings for educators. My hope is that, through a more careful discussion of the particular classroom situations I observed, we might come to a better understanding of what criticality looks like in media education. My preference is to conceive of criticality as a means rather than an end where students are not labelled as either critical or uncritical but instead viewed as beings who already possess varying degrees of criticality and develop them further through certain educational practices.[23]

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[23] That is not to say, however, that certain forms of criticality cannot be developed outside the school or the classroom.

Kendall and McDougall echo a similar interest in abandoning 'the (unhelpful) binary opposition between' uncritically embracing all media versus '"serious" critical study' (2012: 3). They suggest a new way of 'doing critical media literacy' which involves a 'pedagogy of the inexpert' (ibid. 6) or what Andrews and McDougall later develop into a 'model of curation' (2012: 152). The pedagogy of the inexpert repositions the teacher as inexpert and takes as its starting point not media or text but rather meaning-making (Kendall and McDougall, 2012). Building further on this pedagogy of the inexpert, Andrews and McDougall suggest that students engaged with Media Studies should curate or self-craft 'assemblage-events' related to the cases they study (2012). For instance, if studying an event such as the Occupy movement, they suggest that a teacher might have students contribute and participate in a related online group (the Occupy Research Collective). Through the 'curation of an assemblage' students are situated in an in-between space as both activist and critic (ibid. 163). It is through this process of curation that Andrews and McDougall envision the fulfilment of a critical media literacy; 'a way of thinking (and teaching) that resists recourse to the idea of "the media" as external to mediated/ing agents in social practice' (2012: 163). These authors acknowledge that such a pedagogical practice will require 'a very different kind of teacher expertise' (among other pragmatic requirements) but we can also see how re-imagining the project of critical media literacy in this way offers a number of productive possibilities (Kendall and McDougall 2012: 7).

Certainly, there are some potential problems and concerns with positioning the teacher as inexpert. The eventual requirement that the teacher assess and evaluate students' work, for instance, would suggest that she does (and should) possess some kind of authority and/or expertise. Though we cannot deny the role of the teacher's authority in creating knowledge, Kendall, McDougall and Andrews remind us of the bidirectional relations between teacher and students and of the ways in which students can produce their own meanings (through curation). I draw particular value from their work in offering a revised version of critical media literacy for the Media Studies classroom: a type of thinking which allows students to reflect on their active role in producing media rather than view themselves as detached or passive consumers of media – an obvious advancement from the days of teaching against demystification.

Though helpful, the work of Kendall, McDougall and Andrews still fails to offer a clear definition of what critical thinking looks like in practice. Part of the problem here may be the lack of a grounded, normative approach to understanding criticality in the classroom. In his review of the many media literacy models generated by various organisations and people,[24] Share notes that despite their differences in wording most models involve five basic elements:

1. Recognition of the construction of media and communication as a social process as opposed to accepting texts as isolated neutral or transparent conveyors of information;

2. Some type of textual analysis that explores the languages, genres, aesthetics, codes, and conventions of the text;

3. Exploration of the role audiences play in actively negotiating meanings;

4. Problematising the process of representation to uncover and engage issues of ideology, power and pleasure

5. Examination of the production, institutions, and political economy that motivate and structure the media industries as corporate profit-seeking businesses. (Share, 2009: 16-17)

I would suggest that this model (or amalgamation of models) offers a balanced and clear understanding of what critical media learning might 'look like' in the classroom. What is particularly helpful about this approach is its inclusion of both ideological critique and audience pleasure. Combined with this analysis of classroom practices of curation, we now have a framework for understanding critical media literacy.

1.2 Historical and Theoretical Account of Feminist Media Scholarship

The following section provides an historical review of the key studies and theories within feminist media research as it bears on this project. I explore previous academic work on gender representation in the media, which has often focused on mainstream representations, especially those of women. Some of this research has demonstrated a connection (though not always a straightforward one) between

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[24] Such as Canada's Ontario Ministry for Education's Eight Key Concepts, the British Film Institute's (BFI) Signpost Questions and The Centre for Media Literacy's Five Core Concepts (Share, 2009:154).

women working in industry and representations of women at the time. Most importantly, by exploring the history of media research around women, with the various changes in media and subsequently in research, this section provides a clearer sense of the ideas students are likely to encounter in varying degrees at A-level Media Studies in addition to how classroom teaching might also be at odds with a more developed notion of representation. I conclude with an examination (based on the literature) of what feminism means to young women today, and how a possible postfeminist sensibility has been adopted by young women.

Much of the discussion which follows is informed specifically by feminist media scholarship but also broadly by historical feminist movements and theories. Before proceeding it would seem appropriate to clarify exactly what is meant by the term feminism and the complexities that it poses for the subject matter of this research. Attempting to label feminism as a single theory or movement is problematic in itself. Instead, we might define feminism as a group of historical movements and theories centrally concerned with obtaining equal social, political and economic rights for women. In other words, there are multiple feminisms and multiple movements of feminism (often termed 'waves') that continue to evolve today and redefine both what it means to be a feminist and what constitutes feminism as a set of movements. For instance, some earlier forms of feminism have been criticised for only taking account of white, middle-class and educated perspectives which has led to the formation of certain ethnically specific or class-based 'feminisms'. I consider my work as a contribution to feminist media scholarship and for this reason find it essential to highlight how feminist theorists have offered us different approaches for understanding the meaning of gender representation in popular media forms. This body of scholarship might also enable educators to go beyond teaching gender representation in limited ways: for instance as 'misrepresentations' or 'dominant/alternative' representations (a point to which I will return in subsequent chapters).

The following sections are organised into six key areas which identify different strands of feminist media research. Most of these sections are framed by certain decades since scholarly discussions were often in response to media representations at the time as well as broader theoretical debates within social science and media studies. I begin with a brief summary of representations of

women from the 1960s and 1970s along with some of the scholarly analyses of these representations at the time. It was during this period that representations of women gained interest in the academic community (not surprisingly coinciding with the second-wave feminist movement). Another relevant area for consideration (which I address in the subsequent section) is the relationship between representations of women and women working in the creative industries. This is important since some argue that the absence of women in the media industries (and particularly their absence from senior media positions) has a profound influence on how women are represented by the media (e.g. Skillset, 2010). Postfeminism has marked an important shift in the history of women's representation. I examine the beginnings of postfeminist representations from the 1980s and 1990s in the third section followed by a more developed discussion of postfeminist culture today in the fourth section. I summarise at length Gill's conception of postfeminism as a sensibility (2007) as it is of particular relevance to the experiences of the girls involved in this research (evidenced by chapter 4). Though my research focuses on the classroom experiences of girls and representations of women there is a further literature which explores representations of men and masculinity. I briefly address this body of research in a separate section before concluding by highlighting the barriers to obtaining a feminist consensus in determining preferred representations of women. This comprehensive overview will be valuable in later chapters to assess the adequacy of A-level Media Studies' coverage of gender representation.

1.2.1 Women and Media

Since the 1970s, scholars have examined the various representations of women in media. The extent to which a given society relies on patriarchal ideology has been identified as a determining factor in the portrayal of women. For example, from the 1960s through to the late 1970s, the majority of film directors, photographers, magazine editors and others who were responsible for producing media content were male (Marshment, 1993: 126). 'In any situation where a social group has the power to represent another group, it is likely that these representations will serve their own interests rather than those of the group represented' (ibid.). In some early studies concerning the media's portrayal of women, scholars noted a focus on women within the traditional domestic sphere. The main concerns of these women were constructed as being about romance, marriage and children, whilst men

were typically portrayed as active in decision-making and authoritative roles (Gunter, 1995). Content analysis studies of television, film, magazines and advertisements during this time period argued that women were mis-represented (Gauntlett, 2002). Out of those who were portrayed in the media as secondary characters, the majority were shown as married housewives (McNeil, 1975). Those few who were depicted as working women typically held administrative positions and suffered from a failed love life (ibid.: 16-17). Media sociologist Gaye Tuchman argued that women were 'symbolically annihilated' through the 'absence', 'trivialization' and 'condemnation' of women in mass media (1978: 154). Women were depicted as passive, emotional and victimised, to name a few stereotypical traits (Gunter, 1995).[25]

Though the content analytic approach succeeded in producing hard-hitting, empirical data which was key in gaining political leverage, some researchers voiced concerns regarding the limitations of this method (Cowie, 1978; Gledhill, 1978; Jaddou and Williams, 1981). It was argued that content analysis relied on the view that media served as a reflection of reality. This naïve realist assumption focused on how sexism resided in single images or sexist stereotypes like the 'dumb blonde' (Gill, 2007: 44-45). This type of critique risked promoting the simple excision of 'bad stereotypes' as the solution to problematic representations at the time rather than a consideration of the ideological role of those representations. As an alternative to content analysis, others during this time (e.g. McRobbie, 1977; Williamson, 1978; Winship, 1978) conducted semiotic and ideological analyses 'concerned with how texts operate to produce meanings which reproduce dominant ideologies of gender' (Gill, 2007: 10-11). In McRobbie's work from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s of the popular girls' magazine *Jackie* she described how certain discourses were organised around highly restricted ideologies of teenage femininity which emphasised the pursuit of romance as most important in the lives of young girls. Through the analysis of over a hundred advertisements, Williamson (1978) argued that adverts carry a certain 'currency' such that 'they permit the meaning of

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[25] A stereotype can be defined as an 'oversimplified, usually pejorative, attitude people hold toward those outside one's own experience who are different. They are a result of incomplete or distorted information accepted as fact without question' (Patterson, 1991: 8).

one thing to be expressed in terms of another' (Gill, 2007: 49). Women in adverts targeted at a heterosexual male audience, for instance, often signify sex and/or are presented as objects of sexual gratification.

Psychoanalysis offered another approach to understanding and critiquing representations of women especially in film. A number of feminist film critics writing in the 1980s contributed to a body of literature which attempted to understand the female spectator (e.g. Doane, 1982; Williams, 1983). To talk of voyeurism or fetishism in contemporary film theory was to generally position a (male) spectator in relation 'to the woman as screen' (Doane, 1982/2010:75). Rarely were theories of the female spectator offered or produced as a way of understanding her desire and her relationship to a cinematic institution which 'narrativizes her again and again' (ibid.). Through the study of horror films Williams describes how the woman's gaze is punished 'in the woman's terrified look at the horrible body of the monster' (1983: 62). Not only is her gaze punished but Williams goes on to argue that the woman shares a kind of affinity with the monster since they are both positioned as sexually different from the normal male (ibid. 63). To use the terms of psychoanalysis, the monster and woman are both perceived by the traumatised male as in 'lack'.

The limited range from which representations of women were drawn led Mulvey (1975) to argue in her highly influential essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' that cinematic representations of women, in particular, were constructed through a male gaze which consistently reduced women to passive sexual objects, and denied them narrative agency. Mulvey's groundbreaking work, along with the term "male gaze", are often referenced in A-level Media Studies when analysing today's media texts containing sexualised and traditional portrayals of women. However, as the interviews and observations reveal, it may be that educators and students possess very different or updated interpretations of current texts in comparison to the context of Mulvey's writing. Other than Mulvey, the other more sophisticated psychoanalytical approaches do not make any appearance at A-level but are more important for understanding the development of analysis of gender representations as a whole.

1.2.2 Women in the Media Industries

The solution for some researchers to problems concerning gender representation would seem to lie in working towards a 'proportionate representation of women in the professions of media and cultural production' (Marshment, 1993: 126). This would allow women an opportunity to dilute the 'masculine' values represented in mass media with more feminine and/or pluralistic views. Since the 1980s there have been a growing number of women entering the industry, writing romance novels and editing women's magazines and even pornographic magazines (Skillset, 2010). Yet there are still similar values in these texts as when the industry was monopolized by men. The majority of content produced by women, for women in magazines today revolve around techniques to improve beauty, body shape, fashion sense and sex appeal. [26]

Although by the 1990s more women had entered the media industry compared to the 1970s, it was still an industry dominated by men (Creedon, 1993). The majority of women were found working in media at the local level and in administrative jobs while men held the prestige of working at the national level and in the technical sectors (van Zoonen, 1994: 51). Additionally, 'women [tended] to prevail in those areas that [could] be seen as an extension of their domestic responsibilities' such as children's television, domestic programmes or human interest sections of the newspaper (ibid.). As Steiner (2007) notes in her analysis of journalism textbooks, female media workers were expected to reflect stereotypically 'feminine' traits such as compassion and sensitivity. This 'increase in the number of women in media production…translated to mean a decline in salaries and status for the field' (Creedon, 1989: 17). Furthermore, many women in journalism and broadcasting were frowned upon by their male counterparts for abandoning their domestic 'duties' in order to develop their career (van Zoonen, 1994: 53). This, along with the preceding illustrations, clearly demonstrates that the media

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[26] *Cosmopolitan* magazine, for example, continues to publish articles most concerned with 'pleasing your man' which places their (largely heterosexual) female readership in the context of serving/servicing men. Additional articles which claim to assist women in 'dressing for [their] body type' advise women to camouflage the parts of their bodies which are not aligned with an ideal aesthetic (see Machin and Thornborrow, 2003).

representations of women in the 1960s and 1970s as secondary characters, displaying stereotypical emotions with an emphasis on their domestic roles was not dissolved, but rather, was later transposed onto the industry of female media professionals.

More recently, it has been reported in the UK that women comprise '[forty-two percent] of the creative media industry's workforce' – an overall improvement from the 1990s (Skillset, 2010: 5).[27] Census data has also indicated that women working within the creative media industries have 'higher levels of qualifications and workplace training [and] yet lower levels of income than men' (ibid.: 2). Women over the age of thirty-five remain consistently under-represented 'in all segments of the workforce', reinforcing the notion 'that women have been leaving the industry because of difficulty reconciling managing a career in the media industries with raising a family' (ibid.). The implication of this discussion for my research is to extend concerns regarding the representation of women in media to include the representation of women in media industries – where evidently a number of challenges persist. It is worth considering the extent to which Media Studies lessons about gender representation include consideration of women media professionals as well as the ways in which formal media education is framed as preparation for a career in media (a point I shall return to in chapter 6).

1.2.3 The Independent Woman

During the 1980s and 1990s, a shift occurred in the representation of women in media, and subsequently the scholarship which responded to these historical changes. Although men still comprised over half of the speaking roles and main characters on television, the presence of women had grown considerably not just in number, but in diversity of roles (Gauntlett, 2002: 58). At this point studies found that only three percent of women were portrayed as housewives and eight percent as homemakers – a significant decrease from the 1970s (Elasmar et al., 1999). This

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[27] Though this figure is an overall improvement it does not account for the major shifts within particular sectors. For instance, representation of female employment within photo imaging increased from thirty percent in 2006 to thirty-seven percent in 2009; however, a drastic decrease occurred over the same period in interactive content design (thirty-two percent to five percent) (Skillset, 2010: 13).

made way for a new type of woman: a single, independent, successful character, foreshadowed in the early 1970s by the circulation of the 'fun, flirty, fearless', *Cosmopolitan* magazine, and who was no longer tied to family life or the incessant need to find a husband, but rather enjoyed her youth and freedom with the company of friends and via occasional love affairs (Winship, 1987). In films, there was an increase in the number of plots based on female heroines across all genres with examples including *Erin Brokovich*, the *Scream* trilogy and *Charlie's Angels*, to name a few (Gauntlett, 2002). In television, female characters adopted more complex roles. American programmes such as *Cagney and Lacey, Bionic Woman,* and *L.A. Law* depicted women in assertive and professional roles. However as Dyer notes, these 'strong' policewomen and lawyers were 'invariably shown enforcing the patriarchal laws which oppress[ed] them' (1987: 10).

The 1980s and 1990s also witnessed a backlash against traditional feminists for victimising women and for politicising femininity (Faludi, 1992). Postfeminism, as it was termed, was marketed as 'a utopia where women could do whatever they pleased, provided they had sufficient will and enthusiasm' (Macdonald, 1995: 90). Scholars cited Madonna and 'Buffy' in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as feminine icons that were powerful, but still sexy, playful and ironic (e.g. McClary, 1991; Wilcox and Lavery, 2002). Advertisers believed this new postfeminist woman signalled the end of feminist battles and decided to take advantage of her consumer power. By co-opting feminist views, advertisers sought to increase consumption of many commodities aimed at women (MacDonald, 1995: 91). The female figure in advertisements captured the emancipated woman. If the everyday woman wanted to assert herself as an attractive, successful, career-woman, wife, mother and overall champion, she would have to depend on 'material aids and services' to do so (ibid.). In order to be liberated from patriarchy, the everyday woman was convinced that she needed to embody the traits of the media representations of femininity, which was best achieved through the consumption of goods (ibid.). The portrayal of women as constantly needing to reconstruct themselves through consumption is a theoretical concept emphasized within gender representation units in A-level media education today.

By the late 1980s there was also 'a profound shift in the theoretical languages available to media scholars' (Gill, 2007: 11). Some, such as van Zoonen, argued that

despite the differences between content analysis, semiotics and ideological analysis they mostly relied on an understanding of media as transmitting certain stereotypical and ideological views of feminine subjectivity (1994). The arrival of post-structuralism gave weight to the constructionist view of media, that is, the view that media are involved in constructing reality and that there is no one, stable, 'pure' conception of reality (an idea which was already in progress within feminist media scholarship).[28] To call for more realistic representations of gender in media would be futile since the notion of realism itself is dependent on the individual's perception of reality. Instead, as Gill suggests, we might reformulate such calls for realism in media representations 'as attempts to create greater diversity' (2007: 12). The pleasures which audiences experienced whilst engaging with certain media forms offered an additional critique of studies of gender ideologies (which I discuss further in section 1.2.7).

1.2.4 Women's Representations in the 21st Century

Attempting to describe the current state of media representations of women is not without its challenges. As mentioned above, the term postfeminist is often cited by feminist media scholars as an appropriate description for today's media culture. However, this concept has undergone recent modifications by a range of scholars, such as Gill (2007), McRobbie (2009) and Negra (2009), who have sought to unpick the contradictory nature of its earlier conceptions. Gill (2007) aptly classifies the use of postfeminism into three broad categories. The first sees postfeminism as 'an epistemological break with second-wave feminism' largely influenced by poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonial theory (2007: 249). Under-represented groups such as black and third-world feminists critiqued the false universalism of second-wave feminism. They argued that white, Western feminists had ignored the diversity of women's experience and that they 'proceeded as if their experience of womanhood were universally shared' (Gill, 2007: 26-27). Postfeminism in this instance allowed for a more 'pluralistic conception of the

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[28] Despite van Zoonen's critique of these earlier forms of research as relying upon a 'transmission model' of the media, it should be noted that there was a great deal of overlap between structuralist and post-structuralist approaches, perspectives and scholars. The idea of media as constructing reality was evident in even early media theory outside these debates (e.g. Cultivation theory).

application of feminism' (Brooks, 1997 in Gill, 2007: 250). The second perspective understand postfeminism as an historical shift: the time period after second-wave feminism (Gill, 2007). In this regard, postfeminism is not only viewed as a chronological phase, but also as a new moment of feminist activity, complete with new challenges and concerns. Rather than view feminism and femininity as polarized ideals, postfeminism from an historical perspective celebrates icons such as 'Ally McBeal' who attempted to reconcile the two (Moseley & Read, 2002 in Gill, 2007: 251). The third category conceives postfeminism as 'a backlash against feminist achievements' which was defined in greater detail by Faludi in the early 1990s (ibid.). Here, postfeminism is seen as anti-feminist based on the argument that feminism has created a false impression of equality 'and encourages young women to pursue their individual freedoms at the expense of a collective feminine identity' (Budgeon, 2001: 13).

Gill rejects these three approaches, and instead suggests that 'postfeminism should be conceived of as a *sensibility'* (2007: 254; emphasis in original). Even amidst the seemingly diverse female roles in the media in the early twenty-first century, Gill finds several recurrent themes in the 'contemporary articulations of gender in the media' (ibid.: 255).

> These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; the articulation or entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (ibid.)

These themes not only 'coexist', as Gill notes, but in many instances relate to the shift from women as sexual objects to 'desiring sexual subjects' (ibid.: 258). Rather than view women as powerless beings, subjected to an external male gaze, women are now meant to internalize this gaze and survey themselves (ibid.). The declaration of women as independent subjects has also led to the notion of choice and freedom in constructing their identity. It is now seen as a woman's choice to adopt certain behaviours or trends rather than an external influence from social structures. However, as Gill rightly points out, 'if women are just pleasing themselves, and following their own autonomously generated desires, [why is] the resulting valued

"look" so similar – hairless body, slim waist, firm buttocks, etcetera.' (ibid.: 260)? Makeover programmes on television act as an additional reinforcement in assisting women to conform to such mediated standards including not simply their physical appearance, but the interior of their homes, their gardens, and even their child-rearing practices (ibid.: 263).

This research appropriates Gill's conception of 'postfeminism as a sensibility' and makes reference to several themes described above (specifically in chapter 5). I also draw upon McRobbie's notion of 'double entanglement' (2009). Double entanglement encompasses the 'coexistence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life...with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations' (ibid.: 12). It claims to account for feminist concerns, making them seem outdated and unnecessary, which of course allows for an easier dismissal of any 'occasionally voiced need for its renewal' (ibid.).

1.2.5 Representations of Men and Masculinity

Through feminism's critique of masculinity came an increasing interest in studying men and their representation in media. Much of this scholarship began in the 1990s and continues today, addressing similar concerns as those regarding representations of women, for instance: the limited range of representations on offer (e.g. Edwards, 2003) and the over-idealisation and sexualisation of men's bodies (e.g. Gill, Henwood and McLean, 2005). Though discussions have addressed a range of media forms and genres including film, television and music videos, two quite vivid areas of focus have centred on men in advertising and men's lifestyle magazines. The emergence of the eroticised, young, (predominantly white) male body in advertising has produced a representation which is now the object of women's gaze (as well as the gaze of some men) (Mulvey, 1975). Edwards (1997) describes how the typical features of male models used in advertising combine softness (large lips and eyes) with strength (muscular, strong jaw line) which Gill explains is the embodiment of the 'cultural contradiction about what a man is "meant to be"' (2007: 99). These representations are also highly racialised, with black male bodies reserved for advertisements related to sports – reproducing certain myths around black masculinity and athleticism (ibid.).

The representations in men's lifestyle magazines can best be classified in two categories: those of the 'new man' and the 'new lad'. The new man evolved from the feminist and gay liberation movements which called for a type of masculinity based on 'egalitarianism, communication and nurturance' (Gill, 2007: 205). In the mid-1980s there were attempts to target this new man in magazines but confusion arose over which version of the new man was the main readership – was it the sensitive, caring new man or the affluent, narcissistic new man? It was this uncertainty over competing versions that eventually led to the new man's replacement by the new lad (Beynon, 2002). In men's lifestyle magazines (known in the UK as 'lads' mags') such as *Loaded* the new lad was the antithesis to the 'inauthentic' new man and was framed as 'refreshingly uncomplicated in his unreserved appreciation of women's bodies and heterosexual sex' (Gill, 2007: 210). For some, the growing popularity of the new lad represented 'a nostalgic revival of old patriarchy; a direct challenge to feminism's call for social transformation' (Whelehan, 2000: 5). As will be discussed in chapter 5, some of the classes observed in this project dealt with representations of men and made specific reference to representations of the new man and/or the lad.

1.2.6 A Feminist Consensus?

The above discussion of feminism and media representations of women has touched on how the differences between/among women have been a major point of interest for various feminists.[29] It is clear that not all feminists or women in general share the same experiences or hold the same beliefs. Feminists from various racial and ethnic minorities, classes, ages and abilities have expressed different viewpoints from their white, middle-class, adult, able-bodied counterparts. This lack of consensus further complicates the matter of determining preferred representations of women. For example, the Muslim veil is commonly portrayed by Western media as a symbol of women's oppression, however, as Pedwell points out, rarely considered

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[29] Of course it should be noted that the shifts described above are never completely contained within a specific decade. Even in media prior to the 1980s and 1990s representations which challenged the norm existed, and certainly antiquated representations persist today. The historical changes discussed are classified by decades in an effort to capture the major trends in feminist media research, rather than all of the nuances and contradictions which were also present across these times.

are 'the ways in which veiling...may also...serve as adaptive strategies which respond to other oppressive systems, such as racism and cultural exclusion' (2011: 192). It is equally problematic to employ dualistic classifications of either veiled or un-veiled in such discourses, as this 'would seem to render unintelligible a range of subjects who may straddle or exceed these boundaries' (ibid.: 194). The term 'veil' in itself is used to encompass a wide array of Islamic dress, and over-simplifies a set of diverse religious and cultural practices.

Another difficulty in defining the 'correct' representations of women arises in the divide between feminist scholars and women in more general terms. Not all women evaluate media texts or representations through the same lens as feminist media scholars. As audience research has concluded, many women take pleasure in their engagement with media texts which some feminist scholars (mainly those from an earlier critique including Mulvey, 1975 and Tuchman, 1978) would consider to depict women in damaging roles, subsequently reinforcing the subordination of women through the dissemination of stereotypical and sexist gender norms.[30] Radway's (1984) groundbreaking work exploring women's pleasures in reading romance novels is one such example. Whilst Radway holds a critical view of Harlequin novels, she also finds that women use these novels in oppositional ways: as an escape from fulfilling the needs of others to a vicarious fulfilment of their own desires (1984). Ang (1996 in Gill, 2007) critiques Radway's work for a number of reasons. Ang claims that Radway's analysis is informed through the assumption that '*something is* wrong,...that romance reading is a problematic activity that needs to be explained and resolved' (in Gill, 2007: 20, emphasis in original). Pleasure, then, is always conceived of in ideological terms: how can we 'make "them" (romance readers) more like "us" (feminists)' (ibid.)? Alternatively, Ang's (1985; 1990) audience research for the television program *Dallas*, seeks to provide observations without 'judgements about the political effects of the fans' identifications' (in Gill, 2007: 20). These debates persist today in the work of McCabe and Akass (2004), for instance, who explore the *Sex and the City* television programme from the

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[30] There are also some post-structuralist feminists, such as Bartky, who have suggested that such representations of femininity operate as a form of discipline and render women as 'self-policing subject[s]' (1990: 80).

perspectives of both 'appreciative fans and critical feminists' (in Tasker and Negra, 2007: 3). What these debates and tensions reveal is the difficulty in obtaining a feminist consensus concerning 'what feminist media studies should be or should do, and the nature of the relationship between the feminist critic and women' (Gill, 2007: 20).

It is the concern for the media's power and influence that has propelled endless investigations into media representations of women over the last forty years. Researchers have voiced their concerns over women (young women, in particular) attempting to share similar experiences as their mediated counterparts, often leading to what McRobbie terms 'post-feminist disorders' (2009: 96). In other words, when women are unable to perform their femininity to the same degree as mediated representations of women, they sometimes adopt pathologies such as eating disorders, drug habits, and low self-esteem as a reflection of their dissatisfaction (ibid.).[31] Based on these findings, regulatory bodies have been developed to enforce certain standards involving the portrayal of women in media. Many of these organisations relate to the fashion industry and the use of extremely thin models.[32] However expected gender norms in relation to the body are not the only concerns when it comes to media representations of women, but merely the only issue in which the majority of audiences and scholars can agree upon as one which promotes an unhealthy and unattainable standard. Individuals inside and outside the academy are not always united in their concerns involving media representations, as the experience of being a woman is not universal, but rather socially determined based on factors such as race, age and class. These factors contribute to shaping one's interpretations and overall views of the media, and subsequently the representations projected by the media.

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[31] It could be argued by some that in this case McRobbie seems to accept and rely on a media effects model when claiming that media cause certain pathologies in young women. Effects research is by no means endorsed by all feminist scholars and is not reflective of a wider feminist consensus.

[32] A popular and recent example was in 2006, when the regional government in Madrid banned runway models with a Body Mass Index (BMI) under 18 from participating in their annual Fashion Week. This policy was later adopted in the UK and Israel (BBC, 2006).

More recently, some feminist media scholars have attempted to move beyond theoretical dichotomies of structure/agency and subject/object to seek alternative ways of conceiving the relationship between young women and their understanding of media. Notably, Rebecca Coleman's (2009) book, *The Becoming of Bodies: Girls, Images, Experience,* explores through empirical research with thirteen young women how bodies are constantly in motion or becoming rather than 'discrete, autonomous entities' (1).[33] She uses the term 'bodies' not in the strictly physical sense of a human body but rather in a Deleuzian sense to describe 'molecular processes of becoming' (ibid. 49). A Deleuzian body, then, is not a static human subject separate from objects, images or representations but is the connection between or assemblage of bodies and images. Moving beyond the psychological 'effects' tradition, Coleman attempts to understand how bodies become through images more widely to include mirrors, photographs, art-work and so on.

We might classify Coleman's research as a part of the broader 'affective turn' in media and cultural studies: representing a 'turn away' from the apparent limitations of ideological critique and a turn towards affect theory (Tyler, 2008: 87). Tyler suggests that post-feminist media culture has brought about a 'methodological fatigue' in feminist media studies (2008: 85). Today's feminist media scholars are doubtful of 'what – if anything – should be the target of critique' (Gill, 2007: 271). In 'response to calls for more effective critical response to post-feminist media culture', Tyler warns that the solution does not lie in identifying ideological critique as outdated and in opposition to affect theory (2008: 87). Rather, the challenge now faced in feminist media scholarship is:

> ...to articulate more explicitly what 'we' – a diverse, transnational body of feminist scholars – imagine the limitations of previous methodologies are and what methodologies might be adequate to the task to effectively respond to the stark and violent inequalities of the political present tense. (ibid.: 90)

The justifications for feminist 'battles' during the first and second wave movements have become a standard part of the rhetoric used today. Affirmative

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[33] Though that is not to say Coleman (2009) is able to transcend all dualisms. She positions her work against a number of theoretical oppositions such as becoming versus being (49) and the 'actualization of the virtual' versus the 'realization of the 'possible' (51).

action policies in hiring practices are one such example, where not only women but many minority groups are provided with an equal opportunity for obtaining employment. There is an argument, however, that since many of these battles have been won (at least in the developed world), the need for feminist movements today is no longer required. As many feminist scholars and researchers have shown, girls today seem more willing to invest in and support media images of women rather than critically analyse and possibly reject narrow and over-idealised definitions of femininity (see Budgeon, 2001; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Though a major point of post-90s feminism has been to recognise differences between and among women, postfeminist sensibilities in popular culture can be seen as representing a denial of such differences, whilst claiming to recognise and value them. This was apparent when some female students from this research stated that prior to their lessons on gender representation, they did not feel oppressed by media portrayals of women, nor did they find them to be sexist (more discussion of this to follow in subsequent chapters).

What should be clear after this review of the recent scholarship regarding the representations of women is that contemporary representations of women and girls conceal a number of problems. Is it possible that institutions where students learn about the construction and intention behind media representations of women could also be sites for the renewal of a feminist (and possibly post-feminist) sensibility? Or is it more likely that these institutions are merely echoing the standard narratives heard elsewhere? This research aims to explore how female students attending A-level Media Studies feel about their participation in media education. More specifically, this project is focused on understanding their conceptions of how media education shapes their critical awareness of gender representation. Understanding female students' experiences in the Media Studies classroom will elucidate the role of media education in cultivating a greater sense of critical media literacy, especially towards the representations of women.

1.3: Experience as an empirical concept

The final section within this chapter provides a context for understanding and applying the concept of experience to empirical research. It should be noted that this in no way is a comprehensive or complete summary of the many valuable scholarly

contributions, which often delve into much deeper philosophical ideas around experience and consciousness. Though important debates are to be had in these areas, they do not assist in the aims with which this research is concerned. What follows is a brief overview of how experience is conceived of for the purposes of this research. This is done first from a theoretical perspective followed by a more practical mapping out of the three thematic lenses developed specifically for this study. The former relies on previous literature, whilst the latter relies mainly on observations and research conducted prior to commencing fieldwork.

Scholarly considerations of experience often begin by tracing the historical evolution of the term. In *Keywords*, Williams summarizes experience as: '(i) knowledge gathered from past events, whether by conscious observation or by consideration and reflection; and (ii) a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from "reason" or "knowledge"' (1985: 126). He proceeds to note that due to their shared Latin root (experiri), experience and experiment were used almost interchangeably until the latter third of the eighteenth century, 'designating how knowledge was arrived at through testing and observation' (Scott, 1991: 781). After these terms were split, Williams outlines a set of (unfortunate) consequences which followed:

> (1) a distinction arises within "empirical" between the practical and the theoretical (with experience cast as atheoretical or anti-theoretical); (2) a division in science occurs between an inner (subjective) knowledge and an external (objective) knowledge; and (3) there is a cultural/everyday delineation between experience past ("lessons") and experience present (full and active "awareness"). (1985: 127)

These divisions and distinctions re-defined experience 'based upon a set of exclusions...and upon a subjectively centred model of consciousness', seen as problematic and in need of resolve by Williams and others (ibid.).[34]

Feminist theorists are one such group who, in the 1980s and 1990s, intensely debated the 'problem of experience': the problem of relying on an authentic experience as evidence and epistemology. In Scott's well-known article which debates the use of experience as evidence, she critiques Williams (amongst others) for defining experience in ways which take the 'existence of individuals for granted

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[34] See Benjamin, 1996; Deleuze, 1994 and Seigworth, 2006.

(experience is something people have)' instead of examining the historical processes '(of subjects and their identities)' which produce certain experiences (1991: 782). Scott further argues that using experience as evidence tends to naturalise identities such as gay, woman, black and transgender in addition to over-generalising group histories based on the experience of a few within that particular social world. Also problematic to this conception of experience is the role of the historian (or researcher) in retrieving and recording information. How does the historian interpret the experiences of their research participants, and how does she decide which experiences are more salient than others? Scott emphasises the importance of providing an account of intersectional experiences and identities. Rather than focus on the experience of workers as simply workers, for instance, researchers should provide an account of their research participants' many experiences as a man, a woman, black, white, and so on. Scott (1991) concludes by calling for a 'shift from thinking about "individuals" who have experience to "subjects who are constituted through experience"' (in Couldry, 2010: 94).

Twenty years have passed since the time of Scott's writing and, as would be expected, in that time there have been a number of alternative approaches to understanding (and in some cases, re-terming) experience as an empirical concept. Couldry has recently noted that Scott's manner of referring to 'subject-positions' is a problematic and reductive approach, as it does not take 'account of the flow and process of experience' (2010: 94). The process Couldry is referring to here is somewhat different from the historical processes which Scott emphasises in her work. Couldry draws on thinkers such as Bergson (1991 [1908]) to describe experience in a manner which transcends the internal (subjective) and external (objective) worlds. 'Bodily experience [should be seen as] inseparable from other embodied *and cumulative* processes of the self, such as...reflection, memory [and] feelings' (Couldry, 2010: 95 emphasis in original). These discussions extend into much deeper philosophical debates and questions than have been explored here. Indeed many have called for a complete dismissal of experience in empirical research, due to these contested uses. What seems most relevant to this research, despite the varied and sometimes conflicting opinions, is the desire 'for a reintegration of all the exclusions of experience', and the value in understanding the process of forming experiences rather than simply identifying the product of the

experience (Seigworth, 2006: 113). To abandon the term completely would be, in many ways, an abandonment of attempts to understand 'the [continuous] process of consciousness between the articulated and the lived' (Williams, 1979: 168). As noted by Pickering, 'the tensions and conflicts over what is made of an experience...are what make it an important category for cultural studies' (2008: 18).

Providing a conceptualization of young women's experiences is at the core of this research. However, as has been discussed above, the term experience is used in a variety of theoretical and historical contexts and holds a number of definitions. Simply put, experience is applied here from a cultural studies perspective, by describing how 'particular social worlds are experienced, and how the diverse stuff of that experience is subjectively felt and articulated by those who live it' (Pickering, 2008: 24). In this research context, the particular social world is that of the A-level Media Studies classroom, and the subjective feelings and articulations of the female students within this world provide the experiences for analysis. The 'duality of experience' which Pickering describes as both a process and a product captures the way experience is understood for the purposes of this study, and in many ways allows for a reintegration of the exclusions discussed above.

Within feminist scholarship in particular, there has been considerable debate around essentialising experience. Feminism as a political movement and academic discipline rests on the premise that there is a collective experience shared by all women, and that this experience needs to be acknowledged both intellectually and practically speaking. It is equally important, as argued by Scott and other key feminist thinkers, to acknowledge the differences in experiences based on culture, geography, race, age, and so on. The intention of this study is not to completely essentialise the experiences of the female students, nor is it to only capture their experience as female students, but rather to adopt a 'strategic essentialism' by providing an account for the heterogeneity of their experiences, and an analysis of the social conditions which aid in the formation and reproduction of certain 'core' experiences (Pickering, 2008: 22).

More specifically, this research attempts to capture their experiences within three main themes: media representations of feminine aesthetics and the sexualisation of feminine appearance, the negotiation between course material and

their personal engagement with and consumption of media, and lastly explorations of how critical media literacy is both defined and developed through Media Studies.

1.3.1 Aesthetics and Sexuality

As previously mentioned, one of the main criticisms of female representations in the media is centred on the standard of physical attractiveness. Feminists, psychologists and other scholars from various disciplines have claimed that these standards are over-idealized and have created an unattainable expectation for femininity and beauty, arguably leading to a deficit in women's self-esteem. A secondary research objective for this project asks: how do female students feel about the effects of media education on their self-esteem? Self-esteem, like experience, is a concept with diverse interpretations and applications. However it is often used to express the relationship between female audiences and media representations of feminine beauty and attractiveness. Numerous studies have attempted to demonstrate how exposure to over-idealized images of women negatively impact on female participants' self-esteem (see Groesz et al., 2001; Posavac et al., 1998; Wilcox and Laird, 2000). In these instances, self-esteem is often measured through psychological scales which ask participants to rate how they feel about their body and appearance. Rather than account for the broader scope of self-esteem which includes other factors outside of appearance-related feelings and insecurities, these studies attempt to apply body-esteem and body-satisfaction as an indicator of one's overall self-esteem.

Even from within the media, there have been recent attempts to combat low self-esteem through narratives which encourage women to embrace 'real beauty' rather than the false ideals projected by certain 'harmful' media.[35] It is evident that the aesthetics of women's representations in the media has become a recurring theme in academic research and the media and, in some cases, has developed into an obsessive concern. In chapter 5, I explore more deeply how media education appears to follow this trend by excessively focusing on the analysis of women's physical

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[35] The irony of these narratives has been discussed at length elsewhere, as oftentimes, the best way to embrace 'real beauty' as recommended by certain corporations, results in the purchase of a particular brand of cosmetics meant to enhance one's physical appearance.

representation, neglecting to acknowledge other, non-physical aspects of these portrayals.

Sexuality[36] has also been included in this theme as it has strong ties to physical attractiveness. What is viewed as physically attractive consequently defines what one considers sexually appealing. Most sexually suggestive depictions of women also inherently rely on their adherence to standard norms for physical beauty and attractiveness, further demonstrating the strong connection between beauty and sexual attractiveness. This connection is evident within A-level units on gender representation. I discuss in chapters 4 and 5 how sexual stereotypes are highlighted as a main focus of study.

Certain parallels between the focus of the media and the focus of the Media Studies classroom have become apparent through conducting this research. Both seem to be fascinated with the sexualisation and physical appearance of female representations. Since this aspect of representation is central to the material covered within the courses, and also of great focus within the media at large, examining the experiences of female students within this context has been adopted as a central area of investigation. This study explores how the research participants respond to the classroom content on female representations in the media, whether they believe it to impact on their own understandings of gender and femininity specifically, and whether they find that the knowledge gained through the curriculum has contributed to their self-esteem, relating to the particular themes of one's physical appearance and sexuality.

1.3.2 Media Engagement and Consumption

Another key theme of this study is the experience of research participants' personal engagement with and consumption of media. Of particular interest is how these students negotiate between the course material and their own use of media outside the classroom. A common first impression of textual analysis amongst novice media students is that too much is being read from a given text; that there is more value placed on a text's meaning than its actual intention. When asked how

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[36] The term sexuality is used in this context as not only to mean one's sexual orientation, but to encapsulate more broadly speaking, the extent to which the media sexualize portrayals of women.

this issue is overcome, an educator noted that through repeated exercises of textual analysis, students begin to uncover certain patterns, and become more aware of the extent to which media texts are constructed. Whether this awareness collides with their personal consumption of media or leaves a lasting impression is another issue altogether and one which this project covers in greater detail. Rather than explicitly address students' personal media use in a particular chapter, it is woven throughout several chapters and can be seen most often in excerpts from interviews and observations. Experiences with media are of clear value to these students and yet often clashes with either classroom content or their own thinking (for instance, ideas around women's professional ambitions as explained in chapter 4 and the naturalisation of homosexuality explored in chapter 5).

1.3.3 Defining and Developing Critical Media Literacy

As outlined by the exam board specifications, the main goal of A-level Media Studies is to instil students with a critical awareness where media are concerned. The extent to which this critical awareness is achieved, and remains a lasting impression on students, is debatable. A secondary research question for this project asks: How do young women feel about the development of their own critical media literacy? The third and final research theme attempts to answer this question by examining how female students reflect on and express their achievements within the course.

In section 1.1 (see 1.1.6 in particular), a detailed explanation of the term media literacy was provided (as well as the term 'critical'). What is less clear, however, is the extent to which educators conceive of critical media literacy in the same way as the literature. An important first step in understanding how students feel about the development of their critical skills, is to establish what teachers define as critical thinking, and the attempts they make to include the development of such skills into their lessons. Teachers' conceptions of critical thinking are provided in chapter 6. Another phenomenon which occurs in the classroom (and in the school setting more broadly speaking) is the focus on assessment and achievement. High achievement is an evident goal of many students, and the measurement of student success through assessment is an obvious component of the education system. In their attempts to excel within the course, however, some students simply say or do what they believe teachers and examiners want to hear. As will be discussed in

further detail in chapter 3, certain teachers also have a tendency to direct students towards adopting a specific set of responses or analysis, in an effort to deliver 'correct' responses to examiners and consequently achieve higher and more competitive scores. Is there a risk that in attempts to fulfil the expectations of educators and examiners, students dampen their own critical thinking? Or, is critical media literacy a skill that is fully developed regardless of whether or not students express their own ideas? This research theme examines the relationship between student assessment and the development of critical media literacy, based on the interactions with and comments from teachers and students.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the three conceptual areas for the research project: the context of media education within the English and Welsh education system, a review of key works within feminist media scholarship and a consideration of experience as discussed by feminist and cultural studies scholars. This is by no means an exhaustive review of literature in these areas. In fact, what readers will find as they continue through this thesis is that, in addition to references already made here, upcoming chapters cite from a number of scholarly works outside of this review. The intention of this chapter is to provide a basic framework for how these key theoretical concepts have previously been studied and discussed elsewhere as a form of clarification and justification for the objectives of this research. What is meant by 'justification' here is that the lack of previous academic consideration for the critical development of girls engaged with Media Studies should not only be apparent but also regarded as a just endeavour, worth pursuing further in this study. By integrating data with theory, the basic theoretical framework provided in this chapter will be built upon as findings are discussed throughout the thesis, but first I explain how I approach this project from a methodological standpoint in the following chapter.

Chapter 2
Methodological Framework

Introduction

The following chapter outlines the three institutions involved in this study, and the two qualitative research methods chosen to retrieve data. Rationales for the chosen methods and procedures for collecting data are provided in detail. Also included in this chapter is a sustained discussion of theoretical considerations for methods. This is largely drawn from feminist educational scholarship, which analyses cultural production and reproduction in the site of the school from a more critical[37] perspective than traditional educational research. Concluding sections of this chapter extensively outline the process of data analysis, along with the coding structure applied to both sets of data (observation field notes and interview transcripts). Before examining the details of the methodology and design, it would seem appropriate to restate the research questions here.

Primary Research Question:

How might we understand young women's experiences of efforts by A-level media educators to enhance their critical understanding of gender representation?

Secondary Research Question 1:

How do young women regard the development of their own critical media literacy?

Secondary Research Question 2:

How do they conceive of the effects of media education on their self-esteem?

2.1 Research Participants

The sample consists of three educational institutions offering A-level Media Studies courses in England. For reasons of anonymity, these institutions have been re-named as St Mary's, Spring Garden and Capulet Court. All three sites are mixed gender institutions. The rationale for selecting these three institutions is, in many

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[37] In chapter 1 (section 1.1.6 and 1.1.7) I offered a detailed account of the meaning of 'critical' and of the term's application in this research.

ways, a pragmatic one. Out of the twenty-five colleges and schools contacted only three maintained communication and interest in participating. In addition, based on time and financial constraints, it was established that any more than three research sites would be difficult to include in a project of this scope. Despite these pragmatic reasons for selection, the three sites inhabit quite diverse spaces within the English and Welsh education system. As such, they have provided a relevant and inclusive sample of data for analysis. Each site is outlined in greater detail by the following table, with data from the most recent Ofsted reports (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills):

Table 1 – Outline of Participating Institutions[38]

Schools & Teachers	Type of Secondary School	Student Population (approx.)	Diversity	Economic Background	Location	Exam Board	Last Ofsted Report
St Mary's Ms Smith	Catholic, FE College	1,400	35% Black & ethnic minority	50% from areas of high deprivation	West Yorkshire – urban area	WJEC	2008
Spring Garden Ms Davies Mr Brody	Comprehensive	1,400 total; 200 in sixth form	Majority White British	unknown	West Yorkshire – rural area	WJEC	2011
Capulet Court Ms Farooq	Grammar	800 total; 300 in sixth form	Majority White British	unknown	Kent – economically deprived area	AQA	2007

The female students in these courses are between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. At each site five students were interviewed totalling fifteen student interviews. Within the sample of interviewed students, twelve were of white British background, two were black British students, and one was of East Asian origin.

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[38] In order to maintain anonymity of each site, full bibliographic references to these specific Ofsted investigation reports are not provided in the bibliography.

Three students were interviewed during their first year of A-levels, four students were interviewed during their A2 year, and two students were interviewed after having completed their A-levels, prior to starting university. The remaining six students were interviewed during a 'transition' phase, where they had recently completed their AS year, and entered their A2 year. These six students are termed as 'transition' students as they had completed more lessons than those still enrolled in their AS year but had not progressed far enough into their second year to be comparable with other A2 students who were interviewed at least half way through their second year.

In addition, the three female instructors and one male instructor whose lessons were observed at St Mary's, Spring Garden and Capulet Court (respectively) were also interviewed. Ms Laura Smith,[39] a middle-aged white British woman, is the head of the media department at St Mary's. Mr Kevin Brody, a middle-aged white British male, is the head of the media department at Spring Garden. He co-teaches several Media Studies classes with Ms Stephanie Davies, a middle-aged white British woman. As Ms Davies covers most of the gender representation lessons, Mr Brody was only observed teaching one lesson and contact with him was minimal. Both Ms Smith and Ms Davies have been teaching for approximately twenty years. Ms Smith completed her Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in English prior to the availability of media as a teaching option. Four years into her teaching career, she changed over to Media Studies without having to complete any additional training or certification and has since been a Media Studies teacher. Ms Davies also completed her PGCE in English but was able to select media as a subsidiary at the time of her training. She has been teaching media for the majority of her career. The teacher at Capulet Court, Ms Zohra Farooq, is an Asian British woman in her mid-twenties. At the time of observation, she was a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT), in her first year of teaching after completing her PGCE in media with English as a subsidiary. Ms Farooq has also completed a Master's degree in mass communications where she specialised in film studies. While three sites were participating in this research, it should be noted that within each institution, there were both AS and A2 Media Studies courses taking place concurrently. For both AS

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[39] All names have been changed in order to preserve anonymity.

and A2 courses, more than one 'block' of students was observed throughout the duration of the fieldwork. For instance, at St Mary's, Ms Smith was responsible for teaching two separate blocks of Media Studies at AS and A2, all four of which were observed.

2.2 Method Choice

This project relies on qualitative methodologies in order to obtain the relevant data for analysis. The very nature of experience requires research methods that allow for the participants to explore their histories and narratives in a fluid manner. The aim here is not to collect set responses that can be counted or generalized to an entire population − in which case quantitative methods would be most useful − but rather to seek out the individual voices of these students, and interpret them in meaningful ways. This paradigm of inquiry would be classified by Alford as an interpretive argument, 'constructed from theories about social interactions that become symbolically meaningful for human actors' (1998: 42). As Alford points out, such arguments remain a central focus of the 'symbolic interaction' tradition in sociology (ibid.). Blumer, who devised the term 'symbolic interactionism' (1969), suggests that people attribute meaning to various things and situations based on the ways in which others interact with those same things and situations. McCall and Becker elaborate:

> Any human event can be understood as the result of the people involved...continually adjusting what they do in the light of what others do, so that each individual's line of action "fits" into what the others do. (1990: 3)

Blumer's model explains how social structures are shaped through 'the symbolic processes of humans' (Berg, 2009: 13). It is the shared interpretations and mutual understandings of people through which social 'structures are created, maintained and transformed' rather than stable social structures causing human behaviours (ibid.). How does symbolic interactionism relate to the research at hand? At the core of this investigation is the notion that experience matters; understanding experience has an empirical value in academic inquiry. The site of the school, or more particularly the Media Studies classroom, is not entirely a fixed social structure which causes certain actions and behaviours. Rather, the classroom is an ever-evolving social structure, transformed through the interpretations of students,

teachers, administration, exam boards, and so on. For instance, exam boards create certain specifications (as outlined in chapter 1), departments select the exam board they believe will best serve the subject matter and their teaching, teachers interpret specifications and create specific lesson plans for their classes, and students negotiate meaning from what they learn. Throughout this process of meaning-making, there is adjustment and interpretation based on the actions of others, in other words, symbolic interaction takes place. This research is not only interested in how Media Studies develops young women's critical understanding of gender representation, as this would imply that the development of critical understanding is something which is always done to young women, or that the Media Studies classroom is a static social structure which imposes a certain set of beliefs upon students without any further interpretation. Rather, critical understanding of gender representation is seen as a process in which students are actively involved. The interest lies in understanding this experiential process in developing young women's critical understanding of gender representation.

However, as critics of symbolic interactionism (and critics of constructivist theoretical approaches more generally speaking) often argue, this theoretical framework does not always acknowledge or 'take into account the power of material and ideological structures' (Weiler, 1988: 12-13). Certainly there are many elements of the school and of the Media Studies classroom that are informed through 'institutional and ideological technologies of power' (Giroux and Freire, 1988: ix). Though symbolic interaction offers a means for identifying and describing the experiences of students, it is limited in addressing why students are subjected to such experiences and how dynamics of power and institution frame their experiences (ibid.). Weiler's critical ethnography on 'the beliefs and practices of women high school teachers and administrators...touched by feminism' provides a theoretical approach which accounts for both structure and agency within the school setting (1988: 2). She uses the term 'critical educational theory' to 'reflect the tensions inherent in the contradictions between these two approaches' (1988: 3):

> (1) those which emphasize the *reproduction* of existing social, gender, and class relationships and (2) those which emphasise agency and the *production* of meaning and class and gender identities through resistance to imposed knowledge and practices. (ibid., emphasis in original)

Though their concerns are divergent, critical educational theory and feminist theory 'demonstrate the tensions between paradigms of production and reproduction' (ibid.: 4). For the former, the primary concern lies in 'the production and reproduction of class through schooling under capitalism' whilst the latter is 'concerned with the production and reproduction of gender under a system of patriarchy' (ibid.: 3). At the time of writing, Weiler had admonished both critical educational theory and feminist scholarship for their failures to recognise the concerns of the other, and called for greater 'analysis of the ways in which gendered subjects are shaped through the experience of schooling, and in which the complex interaction of conflicting subjectivities and the power of gender, race and class is made clear' (ibid.: 4). Nearly twenty-five years later, and with the many contributions from scholars working to explore these very concerns,[40] Weiler's accusations and recommendations would most likely be considered resolved. Despite these advances, there is still a need for scholarship which provides a more subject-specific analysis of gender within the school. The tension between reproduction and production is, in many ways, dependent on the subject matter. The Media Studies classroom in particular offers greater opportunities for cultural production in comparison to subjects such as mathematics or natural science – for both teachers and students. What remains to be explored here, is how institutional power still operates within a subject as autonomous as Media Studies, and how material and ideological forces continue to frame the experiences of young women in these classes. The angle at which I approach this research is very much inspired by Weiler's work: to understand how the Media Studies classroom operates both as a site for social and cultural reproduction and as a site for resistance, negotiation and interpretation (1988: 24).

Methods for this study involve a combination of classroom observations and semi-structured, qualitative interviews with female students.[41] These methods have

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[40] see for example Lucey and Melody, 2002; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Redman, 2005; Walkerdine, 1991.

[41] Nightingale has stated that in order 'to produce good qualitative research, accurate observation has to be combined with communication and exchange of information and ideas, both between the researcher and participants and among research participants' (2008: 107).

also been selected as they capture the duality of experience. As Pickering notes, experience can be viewed as both a process and a product; a way of being and a way of knowing (2008: 27). The classroom observations attempt to provide an account of the process in forming experiences, whilst the interviews reveal how participants re-produce and articulate their experiences. Combined, these two methods intend to reconstruct and interpret the experiences of the young women involved in A-level media education. In addition, this research also attempts to 'present the narratives of [research participants'] experience directly in their own words' (ibid.: 19).

> This has accompanied greater recognition of the need to deploy research methods in a more participant-centred way, and to develop relations between researcher and researched on a subject/subject basis rather than attempting to adopt a position of spurious detachment from an isolated object of research. (ibid.)

It was decided that interviews would be the best method to establish a subject/subject relationship with each participant, where individual discussions could take place and where students would have the opportunity to articulate their experiences. Other qualitative methods such as focus groups were considered less effective as many of the students would already have formed relationships and this may have impacted on how they interact with each other, and ultimately what they are comfortable discussing amongst their peers.[42]

The observation phase of this study departs significantly from its traditional ethnographic and anthropological format. Where observational studies are usually meant to achieve a strong kinship to a single case of the research participants through long-term presence and participation, this study conducted short-term observations lasting for a maximum of two weeks in several sites. As noted earlier, gender is not a subject which is discussed on a daily basis in the classroom, but rather, it is addressed in a very concentrated time frame during lessons on representation. Despite the short observation periods, data collected during this time has still yielded significant and in-depth findings. The true necessity for observation in this context was to provide an account of what actually takes place in the Media

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[42] In some interviews, students had discussed social hierarchies amongst their classmates and often compared themselves to other female students in their peer groups. These types of discussions might not have taken place in a larger group, where students might have been uncomfortable expressing similar ideas.

Studies classroom; to record the specific issues that are addressed in each lesson, the discussions and activities that take place, the relationship between the teacher and students, and other processes which occur in the formation of their experiences with media education and, more specifically, gender representation.

Narrowing one's time spent in observing particular sites can be beneficial to the overall quality of research. As discussed by Atkinson and Hammersley (2007), periods of transcribing and reflexive recording are essential activities to complete alongside a researcher's presence in the field. 'The longer the time between observation and recording, the more troublesome will be the recall and recording of adequately detailed and concrete descriptions' (ibid.: 36-37). The selective approach of the observation periods chosen for this study has allowed for greater periods of productive recording and reflection, ultimately resulting in high quality data. An additional benefit in shorter observational periods involves the greater inclusion of sites. 'One of the limitations often raised in connection with ethnographic work...is that the representativeness of the findings is always in doubt' due to the investigation of a single case (ibid.: 32). The primary concern of this research is evaluation rather than generalization; however, by including three sites and several blocks of classes within these sites, the fieldwork has allowed for a greater comparative element.[43]

What has been thoroughly considered in this research is the necessary exercise of self-reflexivity 'during the [execution,] analysis and writing of the fieldwork experience' (Nightingale, 2008: 106). It is understood that my presence is likely to have an impact not only on the dynamics within the classroom, but also on shaping 'the representation of the research exchanges' (ibid.). However, a researcher's presence and interpretation of a given social world should not invalidate the data or findings from a study. 'Rather than engage in futile attempts to eliminate the effects of the researcher completely', Atkinson and Hammersley suggest embracing and monitoring the reactivity of research participants in order to obtain a

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[43] As Sayer notes, efforts to achieve representativeness in large-scale studies can often result in 'extreme standardization' where comparisons are rendered 'meaningless, because the research fails to register the fact that the same questions can have a vastly different *significance* for different respondents' (1992: 245, emphasis in original). In contrast, less standardized methods – such as those employed in this research – allow for more meaningful comparisons to be made (ibid.).

greater understanding of the situation (2007: 16). In conducting observations, the choice should not be between a neutral, 'fly on the wall' observer, or a 'full participant' (ibid.: 17). Instead, an observer should vary the level and direction of reactivity and compare the data retrieved in each instance (ibid.). The variation in behaviours and attitudes of the research participants and the influence of the researcher on the context become a central part of reflexive practices in fieldwork (ibid.). This is also reflective of a fundamental goal in feminist methodology: 'for both women as researchers and women as the objects of research to come to understand and explore their own consciousness and material conditions of existence through dialogue' (Weiler, 1988: 63). It is expected that observations and interviews will create opportunities for such dialogue to take place and ultimately, to acquire a greater understanding of students' subjective experience.

2.3 Ethics

As this study involves human participants and data retrieved from them (in the form of interviews and observations), ethics approval was sought from the AREA Faculty Research Ethics Committee. The process included the submission of an application form, along with other relevant material, at least six weeks prior to commencing research. In England, a person who has reached the age of 16 is capable of consenting to research participation. Therefore, this project does not involve the participation of under-age students, and informed consent was sought from all participants (see Appendix A). As defined by the University of Leeds Research Support office, this study is classed as low-risk and, as such, there were no barriers to acquiring ethics approval. In addition to ethics clearance, a Criminal Records Bureau certificate was obtained and presented at each research site.

Both students and teachers signed consent forms, which allowed for observations of their classes and audio recordings. The forms also assured that the identity of the institution and of the teachers and students would be anonymised and that research participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point in time (for further details, see Appendix A).

2.4 Procedure

2.4.1 Classroom Observation

Due to the variation in curriculum structure and organisation at each site, observations occurred across quite different timelines from September 2010 to March 2011. For this reason, the following section separately outlines the observation process.

St Mary's

The A-level Media Studies department at St Mary's is divided into several blocks at AS and A2. Each block has fifteen to twenty students enrolled. Ms Smith covers four blocks in total: two at AS and two at A2. The gender representation lessons were taught over a two week period to AS blocks in December, 2010. Ten of these lessons (five in each block) were observed over the ten teaching days. At A2, gender representation was the focus of lessons over a one week period in March, 2011. Seven of these lessons were observed over the five days (divided between both blocks).

Spring Garden

Lessons on gender representation at Spring Garden were more sporadic than at other research sites. At AS, there were four blocks of approximately twenty to twenty-five students enrolled in Media Studies, and at A2, there were two blocks of around fifteen students each. Despite the larger number of classes and blocks, only ten lessons were observed in total, across both AS and A2 in November, 2010. This was mostly due to scheduling conflicts, as observations at Capulet Court took place during one of the weeks where gender representation was also taught at Spring Garden. An additional cause for the fewer visits to Spring Garden was due to the smaller number of gender-specific lessons within this department. As will be discussed in chapter 6, it was observed that lessons at this site focused more on the broader analysis of texts, applying a range of factors associated with representation (such as race, class, age, etc.). Gender was rarely the sole focus of an entire week's worth of lessons, but rather was one aspect within a larger discussion of media representation.

Capulet Court

Ms Farooq had organised all of her A-level lessons on gender representation over two weeks in November, 2010. I attended these lessons during the first week since, as mentioned previously, there was an overlap between Spring Garden and Capulet Court. There were two AS blocks and two A2 blocks, with fifteen to twenty students in each block. Both A2 blocks and one AS block were observed during this time, as these were the classes Ms Farooq taught. A total of fifteen lessons were observed over the five teaching days.

In total, over forty hours of classroom observations took place across the three sites. Despite the differences in observation periods at each site, certain elements remained consistent throughout. Audio from all observations was digitally recorded, with the permission and consent of teachers and students. Recordings were meant only as supplemental to actively taking hand-written field notes during each lesson. The majority of observations were conducted during formal lessons where I was seated amongst students and able to take detailed field notes during the class times. There were, however, group activities during some lessons where it was possible to either work with a group of students or observe various groups in the classroom. In these situations, notes were taken after the activity or class. During fieldwork excursions where multiple lessons were observed (which was often the case at Capulet Court), it proved especially helpful to record notes during lessons. This allowed for a more accurate and detailed account of the events which had transpired. Based on the environment of the classroom, actively taking notes was not considered abnormal behaviour, as many students were expected to also take notes during class. From the perspective of Blumer and his followers, 'the act of research must be viewed as a process of symbolic interaction wherein the researcher takes the role of the subjects who are being studied' (Berg, 2009: 14). In many ways, sitting amongst students, taking notes and participating in group activities were behaviours which helped to integrate myself as a fellow-learner rather than an external figure of authority.[44]

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[44] For this reason I also made certain to introduce and identify myself to students using my first name (Divya) as opposed to using the same titles and format as teachers (Ms Maharajh).

There are a number of methods for taking field notes, dependent on the 'research context, the objectives of the research, and the relationship with informants' (Burgess, 1991: 192). Notes for this research always began with key facts and information: date, time, location, number of students present (divided by gender) and so on followed by a summary of key events which took place during the lesson. Events were described as either related to the specific lessons which were observed or verbal exchanges between the teachers and students (and occasionally, exchanges between myself and the teachers or students). Physical descriptions of students, teachers and classrooms were also noted. Lastly, subjective reflections based on personal observations, thoughts and feelings were included throughout the accounts, in order to ensure that self-reflexive practices were ongoing before, during and after observations.

2.4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Participants for the interviews were selected from the classes observed in the initial phase of this research. Female students were invited to participate in fifty-minute interviews which all took place following the relevant lessons on gender representation. Students were recruited in a semi-selective method. Certain students were noted during the observations, either due to their level of participation during lessons, due to their racial or ethnic backgrounds or due to their perceived social groups. These students were of primary interest for interviews, in terms of collecting and understanding experiences from diverse groups of young women. Teachers were asked to forward an e-mail request to these particular students, as this was the only means of communication that the schools would allow (see Appendix B for solicitation e-mail). Many of the students in this initial selection at St Mary's and Spring Garden were either not interested or unwilling to be interviewed, which resulted in a second round of e-mail requests to other female students (either based on names from previous field notes or through the teacher's suggestions). At Capulet Court, students who were initially contacted for interviews all agreed to participate.[45]

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[45] There were clear distinctions in attitudes with students at Capulet Court compared to those from St Mary's and Spring Garden. Potential reasons for this have been considered, such as the extremely close relationship students shared with their teacher, Ms Farooq. Perhaps when Ms Farooq requested for students to be interviewed for the project, they were more obliging due to this relationship.

Interviews were conducted on a rolling basis in St Mary's and Spring Garden from February to October 2011. Due to the location of Capulet Court, interviews with five students were scheduled across four days in September 2011. With the exception of one interview, which was conducted at a cafe,[46] all other interviews were conducted on the school and college grounds, during class times. Interviews took place in empty classrooms, conference rooms, teacher offices, and - at one particular site - in a large storage room for textbooks. In an effort to accommodate the participants' schedules, interviews were limited to fifty minutes (the time of a standard lesson) such that they could take place when students had spare lessons. All research participants were offered a seven-pound cinema voucher (the price of a student ticket) to encourage participation. A modest incentive was deemed necessary as many students, especially those from St Mary's and Spring Garden, were unwilling to be interviewed (though even with this incentive, students at these sites were extremely reluctant).

The teachers from all three sites were interviewed in September and October of 2011. Interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes, and took place in the teachers' offices. Remuneration was not provided to teachers and interviews took place after most, if not all, student interviews were completed at each site.[47] The audio from all eighteen interviews was digitally recorded and transcribed. Due to the interpretive approach adopted for this study, it was considered essential that interview data reflect the language and behaviour of the research participants, to provide a more holistic understanding of their experience (Berry, 1999). As such, interviews were not paraphrased or edited during the transcription process. Transcriptions include details such as pauses, fillers, interruptions and misspellings related to pronunciation and speech. Other features such as intonation and overlaps were not always included unless they greatly altered the meaning of the speech (e.g., sarcastic remarks). Actions such as laughter and sighs are marked with square

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[46] Two of the students interviewed at Capulet Court had recently completed their A-levels and were preparing for their first year of university. One of these students was able to meet for her interview at the college, whilst the other had moved to her university's campus in Surrey, where the interview was conducted.

[47] Spring Garden was the only site where the interview with Ms Davies took place after four of the five student interviews were completed.

brackets, for example, sighs were marked as '[sighs]'. Excerpts cited in the following analysis chapters employ punctuation to assist in improving readability. For instance, many students tend to combine several thoughts into a single (and quite long) sentence. Full stops are used in these cases to clarify the beginning and end of each thought. In many places, sections of speech have been excised from the citations by '...' or '[...]' in cases where a more significant amount of speech has been removed. This is in order to remove irrelevant information or moments of excessive fillers such as 'like', 'you know', etc.

2.5 Data Analysis

Field notes were also transcribed and converted into word-processed documents for further manual coding and analysis. Due to the staggered phases of observations and interviews, in most cases there was a considerable lapse between the time of observations and the time of interviews at each site. This provided a valuable opportunity to review and analyse field notes prior to constructing interview questions. The initial analysis of field notes during this time involved the review of key events and processes. The coding procedure is outlined in greater detail in the following section. Other events which required clarification or further explanation were also noted as potential interview material for instance summaries of students' production work or reflections on the exam, if it had taken place after observations and prior to interviews.

After conducting an initial analysis of field notes, questions for semi-structured interviews were developed. The semi-structured interview is a form of qualitative interview, also known as a semi-standardised interview. As Berg notes:

> This type of interview involves the implementation of a number of predetermined questions and special topics. These questions are typically asked of each interviewee in a systematic and consistent order, but the interviewers are allowed freedom to digress; that is, the interviewers are permitted (in fact, expected) to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared standardised questions. (2009: 107)

As would be expected, there were a variety of situations which had arisen in, and were unique to, each site. At the same time, however, there were major conceptual areas of interest which transcended all three sites. Standardised or structured interviews would not have been able to adequately capture the unique situations in a

set script of questions, whilst unstructured interviews would have neglected the major conceptual areas, hence the selection of semi-structured interviews.

As suggested by some proponents of the interview method (Berg, 2009; Grinnell and Unrau, 2005; Trochim, 2005), the introductory questions were simple and non-threatening in order to establish a degree of rapport with the interviewee. They focused on why respondents were interested in taking Media Studies at A-levels, what their expectations were, whether they were satisfied with the content, what they hoped to pursue after sixth form, and so on.[48]

The following set of questions asked interviewees to recall the section of the module where representation of gender was introduced. In some cases, interviews took place several months after lessons on gender representation. It was important for participants to remember these specific lessons prior to asking them more relevant questions. In all three sites, representation of gender was introduced to students through a comparison of stereotypes associated with men and women. During this lesson, students were invited to reflect on and discuss whether these stereotypes were learned or biological traits of men and women, and in most cases, this sparked a number of debates, especially between male and female students. During the interviews, participants were asked how this lesson connected to gender representation and whether it made them think differently about the relationship between gender and biological sex.

Participants were then asked about more specific lessons which were observed in their classes – what they had learned from them, whether they disagreed with any of the ideas being presented and how comfortable they felt to voice their opinions. One of the observations made in the classroom was the variation in the level of control which teachers exerted. In Spring Garden, for instance, Ms Davies allowed (and often encouraged) students to debate and question ideas she presented to them, as did Ms Farooq at Capulet Court. With Ms Smith's classes in St Mary's, however, she often suppressed debates and was once observed telling a student with a raised hand: 'we need to move on'. These varied styles of classroom management were of interest in terms of how students perceived the development of their critical thinking skills. Interviewees were always asked what role they felt the exam board

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[48] For samples of student interview questions used in all three sites see Appendix C.

played in the content of the course, whether they felt teachers or exam boards had too much control over what they learned about, and to what extent they felt free to express their own ideas on the exam, rather than those of the teacher, or in more general terms, ideas which students believed the examiners considered 'right'.

As the interview progressed, each set of questions became gradually more personal than those prior, as recommended by Berg (2009: 113). The final sets of questions dealt more with interviewees' personal use of media. They were asked 'how have the knowledge and skills you have gained in this class changed the way you engage with media?' in order to encourage reflective thinking about their personal media engagement. The last set of questions addressed the most personal topics, mostly around ideas of appearance and sexuality. Participants were asked to reflect on how media representations of women have played a role in the way they represent themselves. They were also asked to define certain terms such as self-esteem and feminism, and then to relate their definitions to themselves. For instance, if an interviewee stated that self-esteem meant feeling good about yourself, they would then be asked 'based on your definition, what level of self-esteem would you say you have?' These questions were developed in order to have a better understanding of individual interviewees: what they value most about themselves and their appearance and the extent to which their appearance is mediated by representations of women. Symbolic interactionists are often criticised for excluding the body and physical experience from empirical analysis (McCall and Becker, 1990: 12). As gender representation is intrinsically tied to physical representations (and this association is unmistakably clear in the classroom), it seemed not only valuable, but necessary to include discussions about the research participants' physical appearance.

Teacher interviews took place after most student interviews were complete, in an effort to include (anonymously) the remarks and observations from students. Interviews with teachers followed a similar structure as student interviews: they began with non-threatening questions related to their histories in media education,[49]

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[49] Despite the non-threatening nature of this question, hearing the backgrounds of each teacher proved quite helpful in understanding how their training might play a role in their teaching methods.

and gradually advanced to more relevant questions about their relationship with the selected exam board (see Appendix D for samples of teacher interview scripts). For instance, teachers were asked whether or not they felt the exam board provided a constraining specification for teaching Media Studies. A validating question was then asked, to ensure that their previous response was accurate (Berg, 2009: 113). In this case, the validating question asked teachers whether there were any additional topics they felt important to cover with students, but which the specification did not include or allow time to teach. The following set of questions focused on certain responses from students who were interviewed. Teachers were told, for example, that many of the students interviewed seemed to struggle with defining feminism, and most were opposed to calling themselves feminist. These observations were revealed in order to hear the teachers' views on how feminism is taught in their lessons and whether they felt it an important theoretical lens to address with students.

2.5.1 Coding Framework

Field notes and interview transcripts were analysed using the 'constant comparative method of qualitative analysis' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 101). The main goal of this study is not to test a specific theory, in which case the data would first be coded and then analysed 'in a fashion that will "constitute proof for a given proposition"' (ibid.). Nor is the primary interest of this research to generate only theory, as might be the purpose for one using an analytic induction method (ibid.: 104). The research context for this study is too specific to generate a universally applicable theory for the development of critical awareness in all A-level Media Studies courses. Rather, the third approach suggested by Glaser and Strauss combines the best elements of both analysis methods. It allows for the explicit coding procedure of analysis looking to test a theory, whilst also allowing for 'the style of theory development' (ibid.: 102) in order to generate and plausibly suggest 'many categories, properties, and hypotheses' which, in this particular case, deals with the experiences of young women learning about gender representation (ibid.: 104).

The categories for analysis were derived from the data itself rather than previously generated categories which were then applied to the data. As outlined in chapter 1, three key conceptual areas were developed to assist in framing the overall

objectives of the investigation: media representations of feminine aesthetics and the sexualisation of feminine appearance, the negotiation between course material and students' personal engagement with and consumption of media, and lastly explorations of how critical media literacy is both defined and developed through Media Studies. Whilst it is true that the themes were used to assist in the creation and arrangement of interview questions, they were always considered broad guidelines and in no way meant to exclude outlying categories during the coding process.[50] As Charmaz advises, qualitative 'codes are emergent' and should 'develop as the researcher studies his or her data' (2006: 187).

A combination of line-by-line and incident-by-incident coding was used to code field notes and interview transcripts. Since the observational data already consisted of my own words, line-by-line or word-by-word coding was not considered as beneficial as coding by incident (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001). Line-by-line coding was especially helpful, however, during the early phases of the interview process. I relied on line-by-line coding after initial student interviews were completed. By coding each line of the transcripts I was able to 'distil data and direct further inquiry early in the data collection' (Charmaz, 2006: 51). This critical form of analysis identified significant processes and proved instrumental in '[refocusing] later interviews' with both additional students and teachers (ibid.: 50). As such, analysis was constantly taking place even during the data collection phase of the research, helping to redefine and focus my coding.

Once the data collection was complete and all data was transcribed a more thorough and sustained coding process took place. Remaining interviews were coded line-by-line and all interviews were then coded incident-by-incident. This type of careful coding was completed in order to prevent my personal motives and/or concerns from colouring the data. As a teaching assistant for a visual communications undergraduate course and as a feminist researcher, I was mindful of how my teaching practices and concerns regarding women's representation might permeate my analysis of other perspectives. That is not to deny the value of my experiences in the process of understanding data but rather to avoid judging the

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[50] The semi-structured nature of interviews also allowed respondents to delve into topics outside the key themes which could then also be included in the analysis.

experiences of others through my own set of beliefs. Coding these very small units of data maintained the focus of analysis on the participants' remarks, behaviours and attitudes, leaving my prejudgements aside.

Remaining true to the constant comparative method, I began comparing units within a single transcript, noting the similarities and differences of each respondent and then comparing units between transcripts and between respondents. Similarly, for the observational data I first compared incidents within each institution moving on to compare incidents across all institutions, noting similarities and differences in content, contradictions between lessons and other key processes. Greater attention was paid to certain types of segments such as those where respondents spoke in vivid or emotional ways, where repetition or contradictions occurred between different participants, where stories were told to highlight situations and where judgements were made either about others or the curriculum in general. There were also comparisons which I considered relevant to the specific context of this research, such as incidents which were coded from data between the first and second years of A-levels and between students from different institutions. Careful attention was paid to noting these comparisons which, as the following chapters demonstrate, yielded quite significant results.

For grounded theorists, theoretical saturation is used as an indicator that sufficient data has been collected. Glaser defines saturation as 'the conceptualisation of comparisons of...incidents which yield different properties of the pattern, until no new properties of the pattern emerge' (2001: 191). Other researchers have called to question the actual meaning of saturation and its application to data gathering and analysis (see Charmaz, 2006; Dey, 1999; Morse and Field, 1995). These scholars are particularly concerned with researchers relying on their own assumptions that the categories are saturated and using grounded theory as a kind of 'recipe' resulting in limited and 'superficial analyses' (Charmaz, 2006: 114-115). My awareness of these debates was of benefit during the final phases of the coding process to ensure that I thoroughly and exhaustively coded the data and to carefully consider whether or not I had reached a 'true' saturation point with all the categories. At that point, the saturated categories were reassembled into broader themes and arguments and connected to the larger theory and research in order to develop core findings.

Conclusion

The preceding outline of my research methods and data analysis is provided not in an effort to ensure what is commonly referred to as experimental reliability. Often the case with quantitative research, a clear and detailed explanation of the procedure is provided to ensure that the research in question can be duplicated by another to produce equal or, in other words, reliable results. However, this fails to take into account the individual circumstances at play in any given experimental situation. As a social sciences researcher highly concerned with reflexive practices I am aware of how my knowledge and experience has shaped this study, just as I am aware of how another researcher's knowledge and experience would have shaped this study to produce quite different (though hopefully not inconsistent) results. Rather, I have provided a clear and thorough explanation of the project in order to inform readers of the process I undertook to collect and analyse relevant data for the particular objectives of this research and the theoretical and practical knowledge which underpins the project to ensure it is methodically sound. The following four chapters now turn to a discussion of the findings which have emerged through the process of data collection and analysis previously outlined.

Chapter 3
Being Heard: Values, Voice and Classroom Structure

Introduction

This chapter explores factors that constrain and enable the experience of Media Studies teachers and students. These factors are largely structural in the sense that they are grounded in the actual framework of the Media Studies curriculum and of the English and Welsh education system at large. I first address the voice of the educators in structuring content versus the departmental guidelines and the exam board specifications − which tend to mediate the extent of educators' autonomy in the classroom. Students often view their teachers as most responsible for limiting their autonomy and voice (as opposed to exam boards) whilst teachers are mostly pleased with the flexibility they are allowed but sometimes identify constraints related to expectations from exam boards. I also compare the organisation of gender representation lessons between institutions (based on observations) and its relationship to the extent which students are able to have their voice[51] heard and their values acknowledged. Evaluations in the form of exams and production work sometimes create certain narrow expectations. Particularly in the case of the exam, students apply a 'tick box' approach to their responses whilst coursework arguably allows for greater creativity and the expression of independent thought. Some of the constraint which both teachers and students express is reduced in the second year of A-levels when students are given more responsibility and 'freedom' to select essay topics or particular case studies for analysis. Students in their second year often express less anxiety or frustration regarding their voice in the classroom.

The choice of the term autonomy to describe teachers' and students' classroom experience is one which bears further explanation. My application of autonomy is mainly in a simple sense of the term to describe teachers' freedom to

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[51] The reference to 'voice' in this chapter is appropriated from Couldry's (2010) conceptualization of voice which I discuss further in this chapter. I refer to

teach in the way they would like, for instance. This is often referred to in the educational literature as 'professional autonomy'. However, there is a much more robust philosophical account of autonomy that should be acknowledged – especially since feminist philosophers have offered such rich contributions on the subject. Some feminist scholars have dismissed autonomy as 'androcentric' whilst others have 'asserted women's need for self-determination' and have made efforts to reconceptualise autonomy in a manner which accounts for women's experience (Meyers, 2004). Though I have clarified that the following chapter often makes reference to teacher autonomy and student autonomy as something akin to basic freedom in the classroom, my use of this term is also underpinned by two considerations derived through feminist philosophical accounts. First, that autonomy can exist specifically within the teacher or student part of the self and is not reflective of or applicable to their autonomy as a 'whole person' (if such a claim can be made). Second, that autonomy exists for teachers and students in varying degrees due to the development of autonomy through their relations with others and through 'ongoing processes of critical self-reflection' (Burrow, 2009: 128). I will expand on these two points in the following section.

3.1 Teacher Autonomy

When providing their histories in education, and their reasoning for teaching media in particular, all four teachers noted the greater freedoms offered by Media Studies in comparison to other subjects. All of the teachers involved in this study (with the exception of Ms Farooq) had been teaching English in the early part of their careers and eventually transitioned to Media Studies. Despite this transition, Media Studies often finds its home in English departments and Media Studies teachers continue to deliver a combination of English, Media Studies and Film Studies modules. Though Media Studies specifications also contain requirements which teachers are expected to fulfil, these are seen as more of a guiding framework which still allows for a great degree of flexibility. Ms Davies explained during our interview:

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students' voice in the singular form to make the distinction clear from other uses of the term – not to imply that students' share a single, unified narrative.

> The syllabus, it covers key concepts like, you know, it covers representation, genre and that stuff, but it's entirely up to you as to which text you choose and what you think is relevant to young people. And you can refresh the course all of the time you're not just, you know, you're not being given anthologies by the government and told what to teach.

Ms Davies' comments about the Media Studies syllabus, however, are very much related to the specific exam board which her department uses: the WJEC. She later acknowledged this when discussing how different exam boards have separate sets of expectations, particularly when marking the exams:

> I think some boards are more open to rewarding what candidates say...particularly with OCR, I think they've got a tighter idea on what they want. WJEC is far more inclined to look for things to reward rather than look for things that are wrong.

At St Mary's, Ms Smith's department transferred from the AQA exam board to the Welsh board (WJEC) when she became the department head nine years ago. In her interview she noted that the reason for the change was largely because the WJEC '[gives] teachers the greatest amount of autonomy [and is] the least prescriptive of the three [exam boards] that [they considered]'. In contrast, Ms Farooq teaches in a department which subscribes to the AQA exam board, using what she called a 'theory-based' syllabus. Her frustrations with the AQA were apparent in her interview, which took place shortly after students had received their exam results.

> I think the exam boards sometimes, uh, don't really know what they actually want. For example, the Year 12 scheme is ridiculous. They have so much to cover. Then it's even more frustrating when you get results back because [in] the first year, [the AQA] dumb [the exam] down so much and when you're an academic school, it isn't just 'say what you see'...So we're trying to push the academic route but then the exam board [way] of marking things is such a simple format. Then the jump from that to Year 13 is quite huge, and they need to know theory...They need to know about e-media, film, so moving image, print, we've got to cover all three platforms and we've got to cover media forms, representation, audience and institution for all three forms. So it's a lot to do when kids have never done the subject before, and it's a lot of theory to get through. So I feel like the exam board doesn't know what they want – did they want it to be academic, or do they want it to be practical?! There's no kind of guide like, 'this is what kids need to write to get that [grade]'.

As a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) in her first year of teaching, it is evident that Ms Farooq felt quite overwhelmed by the volume of content the AQA specification

required her to cover with students. Adding to her frustration was what she understood as a discrepancy between the knowledge the AQA expects students to acquire through classroom instruction versus the knowledge they expect students to demonstrate in the exam, and the discrepancy in the expectations from Year 12 to Year 13. This is further complicated by Ms Farooq's awareness of the more 'academic' environment associated with grammar schools and the emphasis placed on ensuring content remains academically rigorous – most likely the main reason for the department's selection of the AQA specification (reputed as the more theoretical and hence academic syllabus). Lastly where Ms Smith and Ms Davies value the WJEC specification precisely because they believe it to be less prescriptive and allow for greater flexibility it seems Ms Farooq would prefer a specification which is more prescriptive, in the sense of clearly outlining how students can achieve particular grades (i.e. 'this is what kids need to write to get that grade').

These examples highlight the views of feminist autonomy theorists. Rather than conceive autonomy as 'conflated with self-sufficiency and free will' (which implies that individuals are completely independent from one another), feminist autonomy theorists recognise the self as relational (Meyers, 2004). 'This relational self is connected to other selves socially and historically develops autonomy in and through relationships of dependence and interdependence' (Burrow, 2009: 128). What this means, then, is that autonomous action is not an all-or-nothing event but exists instead on a continuum where autonomy is developed 'through concrete interactions with others' (ibid.). The above examples demonstrate how teachers' autonomy is dependent on the subject they teach and the selection of a particular exam board. Based on all the teachers' comments, it is evident that they found Media Studies to be a subject which afforded them a greater amount of autonomy than other subjects but that, within the course, these particular teachers found that the WJEC exam board enabled their autonomy more than others such as the AQA board. We can also see based on Ms Farooq's comments that she regarded Media Studies as a subject which either emphasises the academic or practical, a concept which is given further consideration later in the chapter. It should be noted that the claims made by these teachers about the nature of each exam board are highly partial and limited accounts and should not be taken as authoritative assessments of each board. My interest here is in attempting to understand these teachers' rationalisations

and motivations for selecting an exam board specification rather than proving their assessments as true or representative of all Media Studies teachers. Since the focus in this section is about their autonomy as teachers, understanding their perceptions of exam boards offers us greater awareness of when these teachers believe their autonomy is constrained and/or enabled.

The intention of this study is not to provide a representative sample of various exam board specifications and their implementation across multiple types of A-level institutions. As such it is difficult to assess with certainty the effects of each exam board or the effects of the type of institution on teacher's autonomy. However, there is an obvious divide between the values and interests of Ms Farooq in comparison to those of Ms Davies, Mr Brody and Ms Smith. It is likely that Ms Farooq's limited experiences in a grammar school (the same school in which she completed her PGCE placement), teaching with what she considers to be a theory-based specification, have shaped her teaching philosophy as one which is largely focused on results. Of course there are many other factors which may also play a role in Ms Farooq's distinct values. Out of all the educators involved in this study she is the youngest and as a result has the least teaching experience (Ms Davies, Mr Brody and Ms Smith have been teaching for at least fifteen years). It is also likely that her background in media and communications coupled with her immediate entry into teaching Media Studies might also play a role in her perspectives, seeing debates in the subject of which other educators may not be aware. Combined, these differences in Ms Farooq's personal and professional experience have led her to place a greater emphasis on students' grades than on her autonomy as a teacher. Though she was fully aware of her tendency to guide students' performance towards achieving the highest grades (at the risk of neglecting to develop their independence of thought) Ms Farooq also pointed out the broader curriculum pressures which might lead educators such as herself to prioritise grades over other aspects of students' learning experience:

> In a way, I've become guilty of that where...when it comes close to the exam I give my kids a structure. So when it's an institution question I'll say: 'right, this is a three-point structure, this is how you structure your answer on this question'. But I think that's what [the exam board] is expecting. I don't think that's just Media Studies, I think that's across the subjects. That's a curriculum issue for kids doing A-levels...the idea of 'you need to say this in order to get that grade'.

In the above comments, Ms Farooq rightly drew attention to the fact that the English and Welsh education system as a whole is heavily structured by exams and, consequently, students' achievements on those exams. In England and Wales, a student's A-level exam results will play a major role in determining the postsecondary institutions that will offer them a place and perhaps more importantly the type of courses on which they will be offered a place. Even gaining entry to a grammar school such as Capulet Court requires a certain level of achievement on the 11 plus exam (as discussed in chapter 1) and will have an impact on their future grades. Schools themselves also face pressure to maintain or improve their students' exam results – which are used to gauge the school's overall quality as an educational facility (I elaborate on this form of competition between schools in section 3.3). One would assume that students' performance on exams would be of utmost importance to all institutions offering A-levels regardless of their 'status'; however, Ms Davies' remarks suggest that grammar schools are perhaps more concerned with exams (and exam results) than are comprehensives:

> There is in grammar schools this sort of bottom line that parents are paying for most of the students in the classroom and the deal is that you get the results...[52]It's much more nebulous to say 'well she might have Bs but look at what a rounded person she is and she's fully equipped now to do undergraduate work and she's fully equipped to be a thinking person' you know? It's a hard thing to sell, that. I think it's also perhaps to do with teachers that are working in those sorts of institutions that, perhaps comprehensive schools attract those of us who are thinking about whole people and life and thinking skills and what education makes you, the quality of life, how it affects your sensibility rather than how it affects your earning potential.

The above examples and comments illustrate how the educators involved in this research believe that a teacher's autonomy is very much connected to both the type of institution they are affiliated with and the exam board to which their department subscribes. That is not to say that valuing one's autonomy as a teacher

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[52] Ms Davies' reference to grammar schools as institutions where parents pay for their child's/children's enrolment is not applicable to all grammar schools. She is referring specifically to private schools which charge tuition fees. Capulet Court for instance is a grammar school but not a private school. In other words, parents do not pay tuition for their children to attend this particular institution. Capulet Court even offers a 'free school meals' programme to students whose parents receive certain financial support payments.

and valuing students' performance on exams are mutually exclusive. Certainly Ms Davies, Ms Smith and Mr Brody attempt to equip students with the skills they require to excel in the exam. Ms Davies even commented during our interview that, in some ways, the exam ensures that teachers cover a wide range of content in the classroom. Likewise, though Ms Farooq was obviously frustrated by the AQA exam board and their system for evaluating exams and though she did acknowledge a certain pressure for her to ensure students achieve particular results, she also commented extensively on the importance of developing students' critical thinking skills and the importance of engaging in the 'hidden curriculum' – a concept she described as 'the idea that as teachers we don't just teach the subject, we also teach [students] how to act as proper citizens...they're not only learning academics, they're learning how to behave with each other'.

This section has made a case for a feminist conception of autonomy which argues that autonomy is enabled and constrained through ongoing processes of interaction. Standard philosophical accounts would find it difficult to address the presence of autonomy in specific pockets of a person's life; however, if it is true that the self is relational (and as a result the development of autonomy), then what should also be evident is that autonomy can be exercised within certain facets of a woman's life and in varying degrees (see Meyers 1987, 1989, 2004). Surely the selection of an exam board or the decision to teach Media Studies versus other subjects would affect a woman's autonomy primarily as a teacher but not as a mother or friend, for example. Of course, teachers' conceptions of their development and autonomy only explains one of two perspectives in this discussion, hence the reasoning for turning to an examination of what I have termed 'student autonomy' in the following section. This relates in particular to the extent to which students' voices are accounted for in the Media Studies classroom.

3.2 Student Autonomy

Though Media Studies specifications from exam boards often state the importance of developing critical autonomy, the constraints which certain teachers face coupled with the pressure to cover the entire specification within a limited time frame often leads to a deficit in the development of students' autonomy. This is most clearly demonstrated by levels of participation during classroom discussions where

limited class time curtails the occurrence of thoughtful and critical debates. Students in particular at St Mary's often noted during interviews that their ideas were, as Heather put it, 'brushed under' in Media Studies. They felt that their voice did not matter as much as what the teacher wanted them to say or understand. This was especially apparent during gender representation lessons. For instance, Ms Smith often applied two sets of binary oppositions when teaching about gender representations: dominant/alternative and positive/negative. Representations which conformed to societal expectations were classed as dominant whilst depictions of men and women which challenged or subverted expectations were labelled alternative. Ms Smith would then label dominant representations as negative and alternative representations as positive. This created a very clear moral judgment in students' minds, where certain characteristics of men's and women's representations were identified as either 'good' or 'bad'. In the following excerpt from field notes, Ms Smith explained a writing exercise to students:

> Ms Smith enters the room and closes the door behind her. She is a slim-built woman with short brown hair, casually dressed in dark jeans and a purple jumper. 'For those people I haven't seen any work yet – Tom I've seen yours, Steph you're fine. At the end of the lesson can you print a copy, Lisa?' She continues to scan the students' faces, calling out those who have yet to submit their written work from a previous lesson. 'Right. OK I'm still not sure why you've got nothing in front of you. We're looking at Sarah Beeny and Rachel Dawes from *The Dark Knight*. You're going to prepare your exam case study on the representation of women so you need those sheets and your notes in front of you'.[53] Students are shuffling through their bags in search of their Media Studies handbook. 'So just to recap then, have you all got those sheets in front of you? Have you got yours? Yeah? Where's yours?' Ms Smith walks around the clusters of desks, scolding students with nothing in front of them. 'Come on! Soooo Slowwww! Get it out! Snap snap! Blimey!' Some of the students, like Lizzie who is seated at my table, sigh deeply and roll their eyes when Ms Smith is turned away from them.

> 'Alright. You're going to write an analysis of representations and you're going to be focusing on dominant representations and alternative representations using the two extracts that we looked at to support your findings. So take Sarah Benny first and, just to remind us,

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[53] In chapter 5 (section 5.1) I discuss an excerpt from a previous lesson in this class where students created lists of characteristics for Sarah Beeny and Rachel Dawes.

Jiya can you give us one characteristic Beeny represents?' Jiya looks down at her notes. 'She was independent' 'OK. Good.' Ms Smith asks several other students for characteristics and writes them on the board. 'And one of the things that I would certainly look at is how she manages to successfully balance a career and being a house wife and mother. Now what we don't get to see is all the help she gets from nannies and domestic...domestic, uh, helpers. So the impression we get is that she almost *single-handedly* brings up her family, runs two households, one in London and one in the country, *and* balances a career. And this is particularly important because there's a big debate going on in society about women who want it all. Women who want successful careers and want to have a family. Sometimes they're seen as slightly greedy women. And it does sometimes challenge our values. So there is certainly a challenge to dominant thinking through that representation'. She moves on to review some of the key characteristics of Rachel Dawes and students read character traits from their notes: passive, submissive and in need of rescuing.

'So a good way to do this piece of writing would be to compare these representations and analyse them by making reference to the texts. Explain whether that character challenges or conforms to our expectations. So you'll be able to say that the representations are *either* dominant or alternative representations in the media. And the last part, I want you to give me your opinion. I want to know whether you think these representations are positive and empowering to women. If they're empowering they improve women's status in society they have a positive effect on women's status and on our perception of women. If they're negative they won't, they will be disempowering to women. Does everybody know what I'm asking you to do in this piece of writing?' There is a brief moment of silence.

'Right I'm going to come around and check as you go because this will be one of your exam examples or two of your exam examples'. The students use a lined sheet of paper from their handbooks to begin writing. Ms Smith circles the desks, reading over students' shoulders as they write. About ten minutes elapse when she says to one of the boys at another table: 'See that's not true – does Sarah Beeny fulfil our expectations of gender? One fulfils and the other challenges so you have to make that clear'. Shortly after she makes a similar comment to another boy in the class: 'That doesn't make sense – above you said she challenges and now you're saying she fulfils? You're contradicting yourself'. Then she arrives at our cluster of desks in the centre of the room. She stands over Rob, reading his work. 'I was hoping you would understand that these are two contrasting, they're totally different representations. But you've said they're the same' she says, placing her finger at the top of the page. 'So can you change that first sentence to say that they're two different representations, yeah? Do you understand what I'm getting you to do?' Rob nods in agreement.

During interviews, I asked St Mary's participants about the degree to which they agreed with Ms Smith's classifications of representations. Most of them could

recall at least one situation where they disagreed with their teacher. Rather than identify representations as either good or bad, students often found qualities within a single representation which were both inspiring and problematic, leading to a much more complex reading of these portrayals. For example, one of the students, Anne, felt that Sarah Beeny was being irresponsible for taking on tasks that required extremely physical labour whilst eight months pregnant (and consequently could be viewed as a negative aspect of this representation). However, when asked if they had raised their alternative ideas with Ms Smith, many students said they felt their classes at St Mary's were excessively structured and rigid and as a result discussions were limited. On occasions where students did raise their alternative views, their teacher would acknowledge that it was an acceptable and legitimate point but that examiners had different expectations to which students should adhere. Anne explained:

> You see, we always [laughs] disagree with quite a few things that get said, and then it sort of gets pushed off because it doesn't fit with the idea [Ms Smith] is trying to put across. But if you try and argue against it she's like 'well it fits in this way' but if you think about it more, you realise that it doesn't fit and there's other points of view from it. There's other positives and negatives, and everyone's point of view needs to be taken into account because it's a huge issue!

Anne's comments here are very general in terms of claiming that all points of view should be taken into account when the reality is that some points are more valid than others. As Sayer notes, '[it] is one thing to argue that all people are of equal worth, quite another that their ideas are too' (2011: 223). For example, Ms Smith noted in her interview that certain students – especially male students – will sometimes raise quite sexist or racist ideas which she has an obligation to identify as inappropriate. She said that many of these views are often 'based on their upbringing' or they are 'values they might have had passed on to them by parents'. Labelling herself as 'just one voice', Ms Smith explained that often times 'all you can do is [say]: "don't say that in the exam" or "that's not a good idea"' rather than attempt to challenge their deeply entrenched values. Aside from this particular case, Ms Smith later noted that the limitations she placed on students' learning and discussion were problematic in her teaching style. This was also confirmed by advice from the WJEC board during an education conference where the WJEC identified common issues with students' exam responses. As Ms Smith recalled:

> Most recently we were told [by the exam board] not to discuss representations in terms of positive or negative which was quite an interesting development. What you're supposed to do is look at um, representations in terms of how far they fulfil expectations, rather than a subjective view on whether or not they were good or bad...We should come away from that idea because it's a rather simplistic approach to say some representations are good and others are bad... It's better to take an approach that representations, and especially stereotypes, don't have to be negative. It's better to look at the impact that representations might have or the possible impacts on the way we think rather than to dismiss the representation based on its positivity or negativity... It limits the discussion then.

Through the advice of the exam board, Ms Smith comes to the understanding that her efforts to label representations as either good or bad limit discussions in the classroom. It is also the case that these moralistic classifications of representations as either 'good' or 'bad' are a kind of commonsense approach. Particularly when coupled with the perception that the exam board has right and wrong answers in mind Ms Smith's approach seems understandable. One might also argue that value judgements such as 'good' and 'bad' can provide a perfectly acceptable framework for analysing representations.[54] What seems to be the actual concern here is that students are not encouraged to maintain a flexible and pluralistic understanding of other people's evaluations and judgements, resulting in limited and uncritical discussions of representations.

The data Ms Smith reported above from the exam board meeting raises questions around the extent to which some of the teaching observed in this project is aligned with 'good teaching practice' (as defined by the exam board). As earlier contributions from feminist media scholarship (summarised in chapter 1) have suggested there are a number of other ways to conceive gender representation besides problematic stereotypes and moralistic and rigid classifications of good or bad. In fact, what we can conclude from those earlier feminist contributions is that representations are highly unstable. The suggestions from the exam board cited above also highlight this point. Rather than simply categorise gender stereotypes as either good or bad representations, media educators are instead encouraged to

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[54] See for instance my earlier discussion of Sayer (2009, 2011) in section 1.1.7 which describes how some (flexible) conception of 'good' and 'bad' is needed in order to be critical of anything.

discuss the appeal of representations on a continuum (i.e. how far they fulfil expectations). We can infer from these comments that the exam board would rather see students draw connections between representations and audience expectations and avoid attempts to analyse or categorise representations as separate and stable entities, a problem with the current teaching format adopted by Ms Smith.

Ms Smith's seeming tendency to place her values and interpretations above those of students' runs counter to the constructivist pedagogies which prospective teachers are often encouraged to adopt during their training in education. Constructivist pedagogies are based on a relativist notion that knowledge is 'created rather than received' and 'mediated by discourse rather than transferred by teacher talk' (Holt-Reynolds, 2000: 22). Encouraging students' participation and building on their ideas and analysis are key to this popular teaching format and would be of great use for Ms Smith to apply in her classrooms in order to improve levels of participation and ultimately foster a student-centred approach to learning. As Holt-Reynolds points out, however, 'student participation is not an end in itself but is a means, a context within which teachers work to help students think, question, revise understandings and learn something about a concept the teacher set out to teach' (ibid.). In the particular case described above, where representations are identified as good or bad, Ms Smith adopts a more dogmatic approach by impressing her judgements upon students. A constructivist approach might instead invite students to share and critique their value judgements, allowing for greater reflection and participation.

Hopefully Ms Smith will re-assess certain aspects of her teaching to allow for more critical debate in the future. However, the current cohort involved in this study experienced a denial of their voice and, more broadly speaking, their autonomy as students. For Couldry this is a serious offense as he notes that 'to deny value to another's capacity for narrative – to deny her potential for voice – is to deny a basic dimension of human life' (2010: 7). He further points out the ways in which young women in particular are often denied voice and in some cases how they have lost access to narratives such as feminism 'on which a self-narrative might be built'

(ibid. 117).[55] The girls in this particular cohort not only are denied voice in a concrete sense by not having their views acknowledged by their teacher but it can also be argued that, through the greater loss of a feminist narrative, they are unable to build an appropriate self-narrative which would allow them to gain further recognition in the class as individual subjects.

By contrast, such limitations on class discussions were not a common occurrence at Spring Garden or Capulet Court. At these sites students said during interviews that they had a greater degree of freedom to participate in class debates and to object with the views of their teacher(s) and/or peers. Greater amounts of time were also allowed for students to engage in such debates. Ms Davies reflected on a particular class discussion about representations of black women:

> I remember a conversation with a black laddie in the room and he was quite vocal and spot on really, about his 'sisters' [laughs] and speaking up for them. That made for great debate and it went off on tangents and all over the place and I wasn't prepared to stop it...that sticks in my memory as being a good one.

This is one of several anecdotes describing a commonly observed occurrence in the classrooms of Ms Davies, Mr Brody and Ms Farooq where students were permitted to continue lengthy debates that were often facilitated by their teachers. The following excerpt from field notes describes an observed lesson from Ms Davies' class:

> Students have created what they call 'character trump cards': small drawings of the main characters in the three films they are studying this term (*Looking for Eric*, *Juno* and *The Bourne Identity*). Today Ms Davies has asked them to arrange their trump cards in a pyramid form with the characters that students think are the most positive role models for children placed at the top. They work in small groups at each table to create their hierarchies for the first ten minutes of the lesson. Students debate with each other over which characters are 'better' than others. They slide the cards along their desks, constantly changing the formation of the pyramids and justifying their adjustments with examples from the films.
>
> Ms Davies then begins discussing the choices with the entire class. 'You've all got Pamela Landy - she seems to come up if not top row

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[55] There are a number of factors that can be attributed to this loss of a feminist narrative. In discussing the role of feminism in the Media Studies classroom in chapter 4 I consider how socio-cultural changes regarding post-feminism have denied students access to a feminist narrative.

then second row'. Pamela Landy is a character from *The Bourne Supremacy* played by Joan Allen. Landy is the CIA's deputy director. 'Right. Greg you've got Pamela Landy up there. Why did you think she's a great role model?' Greg explains, 'For like young girls she's like a career woman and, like, a senior member of staff.' 'Right. Is there any reason why young boys shouldn't emulate her behaviour? Something she does that you wouldn't want your son doing?' The students ignore her questions and continue offering positive character traits. 'She knows what's fair and what isn't' one boy says. 'She goes against what [the CIA] say and does what's right' explains another. 'Right. It's interesting you said young girls, Greg, because that's what I thought as well. It wasn't until you said it that I thought "why the hell shouldn't lads want to be like Pamela Landy as well?" I mean that's an interesting point about role models. Do we go for gender types when we're thinking about who to emulate? Or, are we already sort of married to thinking "I've got to look for female role models because I'm female" or "I've got to look for male role models because I'm male"?' There is a brief pause.

Jennifer offers her thoughts, 'I don't think she sets out to be a role model, though, does she?' 'I don't think any of them are' Ms Davies replies in agreement. 'We're not looking at preachy texts that are telling you how to live. Uh, but I think sometimes we take role models from places we're not supposed to take them from don't we -

Jennifer interrupts her: 'But I think she is a good role model because well, I quite like her' she laughs and continues, 'but she's really successful and in control and, most of the time, for a woman, she does have a lot of control'. Ms Davies responds: 'It's interesting isn't it that we're qualifying for her all the time? We begin by saying: "She's successful, she's in charge rah rah rah" and then when you start thinking about it you go "well, *actually*, for a woman in her position..."' A few of the girls laugh. 'You start thinking "well actually she's not the top boss." She's got this glass ceiling and all these guys above her that are actually running things. But..."given that..." Some of the students laugh again. 'And we sort of accept that as a given don't we for a woman in that sort of genre? Or we accept it as a given for women in general. Uhm, but, you know we've got a male institution working against her and she's rooting for the right things and she's trying to do the right stuff and given her power levels, you know. It's interesting that women don't seem to like her, that's interesting that it's not enough for a female figure to be powerful, to be doing the right thing, to be fair, to be getting on but she's also got to please the male audience'.

A possible explanation for this difference in teaching styles and lesson plans may be related to the type of training which teachers received during their PGCE. Both Ms Davies and Ms Farooq had specialised in media education in some form during their teacher training. Ms Davies had undertaken a PGCE in English with media as a subsidiary under the tutelage of Len Masterman. Ms Farooq had

completed a Master's in communications and undertook a PGCE which specialised in media with English as a subsidiary. Ms Smith, on the other hand, did not have the option to specialise in media at the time of her PGCE and as a result only specialised in English. In our interview, Ms Smith mentioned that she was never required to take further modules in order to teach Media Studies and essentially taught herself the content and 'learned along with students'.[56] It is likely that due to her lack of formal training in media teaching Ms Smith appropriates a format more closely related to the English curriculum, resulting in a more structured approach. Many of her lessons consist of lengthy writing exercises where students practise responding to questions they are likely to encounter in a similar format on the exam. Ms Davies and Ms Farooq would instead assign such writing exercises as 'homework' and prefer to spend more class time delivering small lectures or facilitating group activities and discussions. Ms Davies noted in her interview that Masterman's teaching philosophy continued to influence her pedagogical methods today, exploring the 'political dimensions' of media education through non-hierarchical modes of teaching.

Another factor which may be constraining the autonomy of female students in particular is the mixed-gender setting in classrooms. Though this specific research project was not able to include a girls-only school or classroom, previous research has considered how girls' media education is constrained by the presence of and interaction with boys. This is most apparent during media production aspects of a course where students are expected to work with cameras, film editing software, and other technical media tools to produce texts. In these situations, instructors have often found that 'boys seem to be more comfortable with technology and in a mixed-gender setting [they] "take over" operating equipment' (Graham, 2001 in Kearney, 2006: 112). Girls on the other hand tend to 'take a backseat, feeling more comfortable being looked at than getting behind the camera and looking for themselves' (Kearney, 2006: 112). In Kearney's interviews with several educators

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[56] As Bazalgette has noted, 'there is still hardly any formal initial training for Media Studies teachers, and where they find opportunities to attend in-service training, schools are often reluctant to pay the teachers' course fees or to release them from school to attend. There has been a perception at the Government level that Media Studies is pretty similar to English and that therefore any English graduate could teach it' (2007a: 5).

who teach girls media production, instructors noted that 'girls [acquiesced] to boys during the production process' and that 'students' attempts to achieve normative femininity posed difficulties for their engagement' (2006: 127). One educator in particular noted that 'some girls worry about how they "appear" to boys...[and] so will "act accordingly" – flirting, deferring power, etc.' (ibid.). These remarks support those of Drotner who observed in the past that, although boys and girls possessed equally imaginative ideas for producing media texts, 'girls restrained themselves from putting their ideas into action' whilst 'boys were...more playful...and less afraid of making a fool of themselves' (1989: 212).

A similar type of behaviour was observed at Capulet Court when a group of three students (Tom, Cassandra and Janice) were working on their horror film trailer. Ms Farooq had all students complete a production diary which outlined their weekly progress and highlighted any problems with the division of work between peers. During one of these lessons, I sat with Cassandra and Janice who were completing their production diary. The following conversation is an excerpt taken from field notes:

> Cassandra, Janice and I sit in the back of their Media Studies classroom. Cassandra, a tall, slim girl with bleached blonde hair and thick, dark eyeliner tells her group member, Janice, 'We should say: "not every group member is included"'. 'Yeah' Janice replies softly. I ask them if there was some kind of 'group drama' and Cassandra explains that, 'Tom, the boy, is taking charge of everything. It's his way or no way'. 'Has the issue resolved itself?' I ask but Janice tells me 'Not really. We did raise it, but...'. She pauses.

> In hopes of learning more about their work I ask: 'So was the idea [for the trailer] his too?'. 'Yeah' Cassandra says. 'Like the storyline was his idea, like we tried to add stuff in and...' she trails off. Another moment of silence. 'And he doesn't do it?' I add, guessing this is what Cassandra is leaving out. 'Yeah and he goes and does the work we are all meant to do as a group, and hands it to the teacher so his idea does get put forward'. The girls now seem more willing to divulge the inner workings of their group dynamic.

> I also recall at this point that, during one of our many morning car rides to school, Ms Farooq described Cassandra to me as a girl who 'always has a boyfriend' while at the same time managing to be very 'strong' and assertive. I find it odd that, if she truly is very assertive, Cassandra would allow her group member Tom to dominate.

> 'It looks like we didn't do anything' Janice adds to Cassandra's earlier concern. Trying to get a better understanding of what they disliked about Tom's idea, I ask them: 'What would you have changed about the storyline?' There is another brief pause. 'Made it more, no cult,

> like, everything. I don't even know where to start'. I suspect at this point that Cassandra herself might not know what she does not like about Tom's idea. Janice offers some clarification: 'No one's gonna know if it's a cult or a gang or what'.

> Cassandra looks to Janice and tells her, 'Put: "problems are yet to be resolved"'. Janice makes notes in her production diary. She smiles whilst writing and says jokingly: 'Week two: almost stabbed Tom'. Cassandra scoffs and smiles as well. 'Yeah, "week two: dropped out of group"'. Janice adds: 'Week three: dropped out of media'. The girls and I laugh. They make notes in their diaries and look out for Tom.

Cassandra and Janice are clearly unhappy with the plot for their group's horror film trailer which, they explained to me earlier, is about a girl who becomes influenced by a cult and requires rescuing from her boyfriend. The plot was entirely created by Tom – the male student in their group. Though the girls would prefer a different storyline and though they made some (failed) attempts to offer their input it seems that Cassandra and Janice have mostly deferred to Tom, allowing his ideas to be put into action despite their disapproval. This is later confirmed by Ms Farooq who tells me after the lesson that 'Cassandra and Janice do the least amount of work. The reason Tom is taking over the project is because the girls would not get anything done unless he steps up'. Ms Farooq displays a lack of sympathy for the girls and views their inaction as a result of a more general passivity towards course work. However, the observations from educators and researchers mentioned above indicate that perhaps this passivity occupies a greater presence because of the mixed-gender setting in the classroom where girls are more likely to allow boys to 'take over' projects – especially when the project is related to or involves media production. It is possible that Cassandra and Janice might have displayed more assertiveness had they been in an all-female group. This has often been observed in girls-only media production classes and workshops. For instance, in Kearney's interviews with students from girls-only media education workshops, participants noted that they preferred the all-girl environment, found it easier to concentrate and 'noted that it would have been more difficult to include female-centred subjects [if boys were present] because male youth are not interested in...such topics' (2006: 129). Educators involved in these programmes also noted that students gained a greater sense of confidence, self-esteem and autonomy through creating media texts without the assistance or direction from male peers (ibid.). If teachers allowed and encouraged female students to work in girls-only groups, perhaps they too would

develop more independence and confidence to express their ideas. A separatist philosophy may be especially fruitful for girls wishing to pursue careers in certain male-dominated media industries (especially those of media production). In a 2008 Skillset and Women and Film and Television study, women who succeeded in male-dominated areas of the creative industries were interviewed to determine the factors that contributed to their overall achievement (in Skillset 2010: 12). Most of the participants had attended a girls-only school and this was seen as contributing to the 'strong female influences' in 'the early years of their lives' which instilled 'them with a belief that they could achieve anything with sufficient effort and ambition' (ibid.).

3.3 Student Evaluations

As mentioned previously in chapter 1, the practical outputs from students' production work was not included as part of the data for analysis in this research. Not all students selected gender as a key issue to address in their texts and, even in cases where gender was the main focus, assessing the development of students' critical awareness would have been quite difficult to extract from film trailers, websites, advertisements etc. My decision to exclude the analysis of students' practical assignments from the data collected is not meant to deny the role or value of creative work in developing greater critical insight. The decision from exam boards to include both final examinations and production work in student evaluations highlights the value of technical media production in media education. That said there are still certain concerns related to evaluations and assessment which require further address. For instance, the question still remains as to whether such forms of evaluation are in fact helping students to gain a deeper understanding of gender representation or whether they are simply meant as tools to assess students' performance (and whether the latter is an accurate gauge of the former). Also of importance to address in this section is the extent to which evaluations (both exams and coursework) allow students the opportunity to express their ideas as opposed to simply fulfilling expectations from educators and exam boards. As I shall show, the ability for students to express their ideas is often constrained by other factors such as teacher training and the availability of resources in terms of funding.

For all Media Studies classes observed the final examination and production assignment comprise students' final grades. These two forms of evaluation offer assessment on two distinct areas of learning: theory and practice. Exams create a structured, standardised environment where students are expected to answer the same sets of questions in a monitored and timed setting. The production assignments are meant to provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of conventions and their ability to effectively use technical equipment by producing their own media text(s). The creation of students' production work takes place over a much longer period of time during the semester, where teachers are permitted to provide ongoing feedback and recommendations to improve students' work. Together, these two forms of assessment should capture a more complete picture of a students' success in Media Studies. However, students' development in both media theory and practice is at times complicated by external factors such as the extent of their teacher's knowledge and background and the pressures faced by their school to maintain or improve their national ratings.

When discussing teacher autonomy at the beginning of the chapter, the pressure which teachers face to ensure that students perform well on exams was raised as a potential constraint. This is more broadly connected to a growing pressure faced by schools across England and Wales, resulting in what Buckingham terms a 'marketisation' of education (2011: 213). 'This involves the importing of ideas and techniques from the private sector in order to make education more "business-like"' (ibid.). In this educational model competition between schools is high and their quality is measured based on 'published league tables of test results' (ibid.). Students' performance on exams then becomes of utmost importance to schools and some teachers will inevitably 'teach to the test...in order to secure competitive advantage in the league tables' (ibid.: 216). In certain subjects such as math and science where correct and incorrect answers are apparent it is less problematic to 'teach to the test' whilst at the same time ensuring that students are learning the appropriate content and building the necessary skills. Subjects such as Media Studies, where answers are more subjective, complex and interpretive, are not as straightforward to evaluate in terms of correct and incorrect responses. Efforts to 'teach to the test' are therefore more contentious in courses where students are meant to be learning how to develop independent and critical thinking skills as opposed to

writing what they think an examiner expects to read (or what they think will be evaluated as the 'right' answer). Ms Farooq shared her thoughts on the exam in the following excerpt:

> We discuss in class all the time, 'cause if I bring up a theory kids will say 'that's bollocks'...but they don't put that down on paper [in the exam]. It's difficult to teach to do that but then I don't think the board or the exam questions make that available or make that a possibility. As a subject [pause] it is more like box-ticking actually. [The students] think 'well I need to say this and this and this' but that's destroying the whole subject because [Media Studies is] about that freedom of thought.

Ms Farooq's comments raise the question of whether Media Studies should even include a final exam as evaluation. It is entirely possible that a subject such as Media Studies, due to its very nature, is not best served via standardised examinations. Perhaps the skills that students are meant to gain in Media Studies cannot be adequately assessed by exam-type evaluations.[57] For instance, the WJEC specification for A-level Media Studies identifies four key aims which the subject should fulfil. They are to:

- Enhance [candidates'] enjoyment and appreciation of the media and its role in their daily lives.
- Develop critical understanding of the media through engagement with media products and concepts and through the creative application of production skills.
- Explore production processes, technologies and other relevant contexts.
- Become independent in research skills and their application in [candidates'] production work and in developing their own views and interpretations. (WJEC, 2009: 8)

Out of these four aims three explicitly mention production skills, production processes and production work as central components of the curriculum and yet the final examination (which was viewed by the teachers and students in my study as the most important form of assessment) does not test or evaluate students' production skills or work. Attempts to resolve this disjuncture between learning aims for the subject versus those tested in the exam have been made with other curricula such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) – an educational system which Ms Farooq

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[57] This problem is not unique to Media Studies but is in fact a more widespread concern for A-level subjects across the humanities and social sciences which aim to develop certain skills that are not 'testable' in the traditional sense.

claims is reputed as 'even more academic than A-levels'. Though it does not offer Media Studies specifically, the IB system does contain a film studies course which overlaps with some Media Studies content. Ms Farooq explains that IB film studies is one of the only IB courses evaluated by 'one hundred percent coursework'. Students are assessed by an extended essay, a documentary script, a film and an oral commentary. By providing students with opportunities to express their ideas through producing their own content these four evaluations arguably assess the learning outcomes of film studies (and by extension Media Studies) more effectively than might an exam. These forms of evaluation, if applied to A-level Media Studies, would also reduce some of the pressure that educators face to ensure they teach content which is always relevant to a final exam. Certainly coursework could also be at risk of what Ms Farooq refers to as a 'box-ticking' mentality where assessment is involved but at least, in the case of coursework, the learning outcomes for the subject would be more aligned with those tested by the evaluations. For instance, producing an extended essay requires the independent research skills cited by the fourth WJEC aim and producing a film fulfils the 'creative application of production skills' aim (2009). As a result, even if students attempted to produce work which 'ticks the boxes' for exam boards, these expectations would be less at odds with the development of key aims and skills like those mentioned above by the WJEC. The students and teachers in this study were never observed criticising how coursework is assessed but, as I have outlined elsewhere in this chapter (and as others in the media have also noted), teachers and students often articulate concerns about the 'unfair' evaluations of exams.[58] This offers evidence to support the notion that a discrepancy exists between Media Studies content and the formal examinations used to evaluate students' grasp of this content. It also highlights the potential success of eliminating an exam and implementing more evaluations akin to those of the IB system which rely on coursework alone.

Earlier in chapter 1, I briefly discussed a number of independent bodies and regulatory agencies responsible for shaping A-level Media Studies content. Ofqual

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[58] The most recent publication of A-level exam results in August, 2012 revealed 'the biggest drop in top grades in the history of A-levels' (Garner, 2012). Some teachers are claiming that exam boards have purposely manipulated results due to 'political pressure to reverse grade inflation' (ibid.).

in particular plays a significant role in determining the content and structure for A-levels. In suggesting the potential value of increasing the practical elements of A-level Media Studies, it is important that I acknowledge the larger institutional context in which A-level study is situated. The decision to eliminate the A-level Media Studies exam (or any major change to the assessment of A-level study) does not lie with the exam boards themselves but instead with Ofqual and Secretary of State for Education, currently Michael Gove MP. Previously the QCA/QCDA was responsible for imposing standard requirements for A-level specifications which exam boards were required to follow. In the particular case of Media Studies, the percentage of assessment that could be allocated to media practice and other coursework was determined by the QCA/QCDA. Bazalgette notes that in the 1970s when 'the first formal examined courses in film studies were established' many specifications included coursework as a substantial part of assessment (2007a: 4). Today coursework and practical production work comprises fifty percent or less of the overall assessment.

For A-level courses Ofqual now produces subject criteria documents outlining the objectives and content all exam boards must follow when creating specifications. In January of 2013, Gove wrote to Ofqual and outlined a number of changes to the structure of A-levels and 'also confirmed plans for…leading universities to be more closely involved in developing the content of new A levels' (DfE, 2013). In the next few years, then, we are likely to see universities contribute to the development of A-level content and further changes in expectations for A-level Media Studies. It remains to be seen how these changes will impact the percentage of assessment allocated to practical production.

Also problematic in ensuring students' equal success with theory and practice is their educator's knowledge and background. As mentioned earlier, Ms Smith's lack of specialised training in media and/or communications may have resulted in certain limitations both in terms of content and delivery. Equally problematic though is the divide between teachers who are trained mostly in media theory versus those trained specifically in media practice. Such distinctions often result in the former teaching what are considered the more 'academic' A-levels and the latter teaching in the more 'vocational' BTEC programmes. I highlight this as problematic because of the many educational scholars and industry experts who have

cited the importance of integrating both theory and practice in order for students to attain a much deeper and holistic understanding of the media (see chapter 1, section 1.3). In chapter 1 I have also discussed previous research by Burn & Durran (2007), for instance, which considers how theory and practice are mutually beneficial; strengthening one's abilities in the former leads to improvements in the latter and vice versa. Yet it seems that schools continue to define curricula which emphasise theory as academic and those which emphasise practice as vocational, consequently channelling their funding and resource development into the curriculum with which they most identify. As Ms Farooq remarks:

> There's the issues of funding and...'do you have enough money to make sure every child has the best learning experience in terms of equipment?' and that depends on what type of school you are. If you're more academic are you gonna put that money into the practical? Possibly not. If you're more practical are you gonna put the money into sending teachers out on courses to help their academics? Probably not. So it's interesting, there's politics on both sides.

Of course simply acknowledging that theory and practice should work together does not solve the larger problems in the field of media and communications but at least efforts to strike a balance would expose students to both the intellectual and technical aspects of media education. An additional impediment to achieving this balance is not only where funding should be channelled but also the amount of funding available to schools. This inevitably returns us to issues of marketisation in education and raises questions around the cultural geography and catchment area of schools particularly for working-class students, who are 'more frequently confined to schools that are deemed to be "failing", and that struggle to avoid a spiral of decline' (Lauder and Hughes, 1999 in Buckingham, 2011: 216). As Buckingham goes on to argue, '[in] this way, education markets systematically favour those who are already privileged in terms of social, educational and economic capital, and marketisation would appear to result in an increasing degree of social segregation' (ibid.). In terms of the schools involved in this particular study, they each appeal to quite a distinct range of students and are located in very diverse areas. Capulet Court is a grammar school targeting high-achieving students yet is located in an economically-deprived area; Spring Garden is a comprehensive school which appeals to a broad range of students in terms of achievement and is located in a rural area; lastly, St Mary's is a further education (FE) college located in

an urban area with the greatest diversity of students in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic class and achievement levels. Despite these differences, all three sites maintain good ratings as indicated by recent Ofsted reports.[59] Regardless of their academic standing, there is still a concern that certain schools lack the necessary funds to invest in resources to improve media production and that those which possess adequate funding may simply be unwilling to develop such resources for media practice.

Observations at each of the institutions involved in this research certainly brought to light discrepancies in the kinds of resources and equipment available to students. On days where students at Capulet Court were to work on their practical assignments, Ms Farooq would enter the classroom pushing a trolley of laptops: one for each student. At Spring Garden and St Mary's, students would have to distribute themselves in several small computer labs with older desktop models. Sometimes two or three students would huddle around a single computer to conduct their research. Ms Farooq could easily sit on an office chair and slide from one end of the room to the other, observing students' work and discussing their progress face-to-face. Ms Davies and Ms Smith, on the other hand, would travel between computer labs, hovering over students in an attempt to assess their progress (which would inevitably decline as soon as the teacher left the room).

Identifying A-levels as a more academic route for students should not discount the value of media practice in enhancing their academic abilities. Yet the attitudes of A-level Media Studies teachers sometimes suggest a diminution in the value of production work. For instance, at the end of one of Ms Smith's lessons, I joined in a conversation with Ms Smith and another Media Studies teacher in her department. I mentioned that her students often commented about the extent to

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[59] However, there is an implication in Ms Davies' comments that Media Studies is not given adequate consideration when such reports are produced: We've had two [Ofsted] inspections here, and the last two inspections, both went OK. The sixth form do really well. But they didn't bother to see a single Media Studies lesson. They came in, the sixth form has been given an outstanding and they didn't see any Media Studies and film studies, they didn't see any music, I don't think they saw any art, and you start to think 'well you know that's not a coincidence that you really don't give a damn about those subjects'...Basically they couldn't care less what Media Studies teachers are doing.

which they enjoyed practical work.[60] Ms Smith's reaction was somewhat dismissive, rolling her eyes and commenting: 'of course they prefer production work because it is the fun stuff'. Her colleague smiled and nodded her head in agreement. Ms Farooq also noted in her interview that it is the theoretical aspects of Media Studies – as opposed to the practical aspects – which work to dispel its reputation of being a 'soft subject'. Though subtle, there is an implication in such comments that media production is more amusing and therefore less serious and less academic than the complex theoretical work which students complete. All of the above factors, from teachers' limited skills in media production to available funds for equipment to the effects of a free market educational model, have led to a diminished presence of practical coursework in A-level Media Studies, ultimately diminishing students' creative development. This is not to suggest that including a greater production element to the course would automatically ensure greater critical development. In fact the above example of Tom, Cassandra and Janice's plot for their horror film trailer calls into question the relevance of practice in encouraging students to think critically about gender stereotypes. However, in the examples that follow (particularly in Ms Farooq's classes), there is evidence to suggest that not only does media practice develop students' skills but also that through certain kinds of creative work students can develop a richer understanding of gender representation.

Despite this subtle dismissive attitude towards production work, students and teachers agree that practical work does allow for a much greater expression of individual ideas where students are 'free' to produce their own media texts (in actuality, however, greater independence was mostly observed with second year coursework from Capulet Court students – as the examples below demonstrate). These types of practical assignments seem especially helpful in allowing students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of more 'technical' aspects of media and their connection to generic or narrative conventions. For instance when producing their horror film trailers, students are expected to demonstrate their awareness of generic conventions by reproducing specific camera angles or editing

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[60] During interviews in response to the questions 'why did you take Media Studies?' and 'what do you enjoy most about the class?' many students cited their production work as a key reason for their initial desire to take the course and/or as one of the most enjoyable aspects of the course.

techniques which are consistent with the horror genre. Less common are assignments where students are expected to subvert or challenge these conventions to produce alternative forms of such texts. Ms Farooq's classes at Capulet Court were the only sites where students in their second year of A-levels (A2) were encouraged to create texts which subverted the conventions of mainstream representations. In these cases, students developed a much stronger awareness of how gender, race and nationality (for example) stereotypically feature in the media and how they might produce texts which then challenge such stereotypes. In Billie's production assignment she decided to create an advert for a fashion magazine to promote prescriptive glasses. In an effort to subvert traditional gender stereotypes, she explained that during the photoshoot she wanted to reverse the roles of the male and female models. In other words, the female model would be dressed and styled as a man and the male model as a woman. For Billie, the intention was not only to produce a text that would be favourably assessed but to 'make a statement' about 'how comforted we are by [gender] stereotypes' and consequently how discomforted we are when they are subverted. Diane, a student from the same class, explained that she wanted to create a soap opera for a male audience:

> Ms Farooq gives students today's lesson to develop their coursework. She spends a few moments talking to each student, ensuring they are on track with their assignments. Other students share ideas with one another, occasionally distracted by a YouTube video or a Google search. I pull a chair over to where Debbie is sitting – she is quietly working on her assignment. 'How's your coursework coming along' I ask her. She has a website about soap operas open on her laptop. 'Soap operas?' 'Yeah I'm doing narrative structure of soap operas and how they attract a female audience rather than like, males' she explains. 'Yeah, are you a fan of soaps?' I ask, already intrigued by her chosen topic.

> 'Yeah I do like to watch them 'cause it gets quite interesting. Some of them like the main three *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale* they're the ones I watch I don't really watch the other ones and I find them interesting 'cause a lot of people like, women, it makes them come across as strong, powerful women rather than what it actually is in reality. 'Cause in reality men are like powerful and strong and women are seen as less to men. Whereas in the soap operas it sort of changes, does the opposite and that's why I think it attracts women more than men'. 'Sort of like a fantasy world' I suggest. 'Yeah'.

> I am surprised that Debbie has chosen soap operas and enjoys watching them. There is a 'tomboy' quality to her. She always sits with and talks to her two male friends in the class: Neil and Lewis. I have

never seen her giggle like the other girls at the frequent jokes other students make during lessons and she often works diligently and in isolation from the others. She mostly wears dark coloured clothing – today her outfit consists of black, skinny jeans with her signature burgundy, leather motorcycle jacket.

'So what kind of text are you planning on making?' I ask, even though I can already see a layout for a television guide on her laptop. 'I was gonna do like a TV mag sort of for it and I was gonna do, the main bit was gonna be creating a new soap but aimed at men to contradict the normal, traditional soaps. Like maybe something to do with men in prison and that would be my main part and then a TV guide soap diary kind of thing'.

These above examples from Billie and Debbie's coursework demonstrate how media practice can develop more than students' technical skills alone (especially in cases where students create critical alternatives to more common representations).

Generally speaking students in their second year across all three sites were expected to focus on more than genre and narrative including for instance certain representational aspects of texts. In other words, most of the A2 students in this study were more deeply engaging with the politics of representation (and gender representation specifically) than those in their first year. The emphasis on critical work in the A2 classes would suggest that students are not only expected to develop a greater critical autonomy in their second year of Media Studies but also are permitted the flexibility to express individual ideas and opinions. These dynamics are apparent across A-level subjects where students are challenged further in their second year and also allowed greater freedom and control over their learning – most likely in order to prepare them for the independence and responsibility they will gain at university. Of particular interest for this project, however, are the specific ways in which students are challenged further in their second year of Media Studies when learning about gender representation.

During interviews, the four educators involved in this research made similar comments regarding the transition from Year 12 to Year 13 and how content is further complicated. They noted the greater emphasis on theoretical concepts, the opportunities students have to challenge these concepts and the independence they are allowed when producing coursework in their second year. The first year of A-levels was often spoken of as a time when students are exposed to a number of basic key concepts and are expected to reiterate or, as Ms Davies put it, 'parrot back' these ideas in their work. The second year of A-levels is when teachers feel more

comfortable to push 'theoretical' boundaries with students, complicating and problematising the basic concepts they had addressed previously in the first year. Ms Davies also noted that students are 'expected to be doing wider reading' which they have to 'apply to their own case studies' suggesting a greater sense of student autonomy but also of accountability in their second year. Gender was specifically mentioned by Ms Smith as a concept which is considered in greater depth at A2:

> I do think [intellectual arguments] are developed a lot more at A2. Certainly when they have to do their independent research essays and when they have to write in some significant detail about representation...some of them are really quite in depth studies. We got a comment by the moderator who read...the work of...a male student who had written an essay on the representation of women in horror. And he said he was delighted to find that this investigation avoided the cliché and obvious approaches for a more in depth and sophisticated exploration of that issue...but I think that comes through independent research. So it does mean something when they find it out for themselves, it's a lot more powerful than if I just tell them what to think.

At the end of this excerpt, Ms Smith pointed out the added value and 'power' of independent research in comparison to more traditional classroom instruction. Contrary to previous concerns which teachers expressed this particular examiner actually rewarded the student for his independent thought. This example highlights that perhaps examiners are not simply looking for standard responses when evaluating student work, especially for A2 students. Like Ms Smith, Ms Farooq noted that representation does not feature as much in AS simply because there is not enough time but, during the A2 year, students complete a representation case study where gender features more prominently. Students also expressed a sense of independence and critical development in their second year of A-level Media Studies, citing many of the previously mentioned reasons as key to the growth of their critical awareness.

Conclusion

This chapter has identified many factors which in some cases either constrain or enrich the development of teachers' and students' autonomy. It has highlighted how certain institutional and structural forces – such as exam boards – pressure teachers in varying degrees to address an array of issues and subjects which at times leaves little scope for further debate or discussion within the classroom. Aside from

these structural forces, some teachers are better equipped to teach the subject than others for complex reasons related to their life experiences. For instance, teachers who are not specifically trained in media education would likely struggle more than those who are qualified Media Studies educators in terms of ensuring that content and lessons are reflective of the discipline's ethos as opposed to those of English (for example). Both the students and the curriculum would most likely benefit from the implementation of more stringent regulations to ensure that educators are qualified and/or trained specifically in media education.

Mixed-gender classrooms may also hinder the development of girls' media literacy, specifically in relation to practical coursework where boys are often seen 'taking charge' of such projects. In terms of evaluations, it is apparent that examinations take precedence over production work despite the potential opportunities for individual expression and improved critical literacy afforded by media practice. The necessity to prepare students for the 'academic' environment they will encounter at university has resulted in a focus on teaching media theory. Despite the particular emphasis on theory in students' second year of Media Studies they are encouraged by both teachers and examiners to apply and critique these concepts through independent research leading to more insightful and original analysis which is arguably a greater reflection of their voice. Also worth noting are the emerging differences between each school involved in this research. In terms of resources, for instance, Capulet Court has been able to invest more in equipment for Media Studies students in comparison to Spring Garden and St Mary's. The teaching and classroom management styles of Ms Smith, Ms Davies and Ms Farooq are also quite distinct (as evidenced by field note excerpts). Other apparent differences between schools and teachers are brought to light in subsequent chapters, highlighting the complexity in offering a comprehensive assessment of girls' classroom experiences.

Earlier in this chapter I made reference to feminist philosophical accounts of autonomy as well as the loss of a particular feminist narrative which may in part be responsible for the denial of girls' voice among other consequences such as girls' 'illegible rage' (McRobbie, 2009). The feminist philosophical accounts of autonomy and Couldry's observation of a lost feminist narrative for girls highlight the particular importance of autonomy and voice for female youth and also suggest that

a feminist narrative would help to resolve some of these ongoing concerns for girls. It is with this in mind that the following chapter turns to a discussion of possible opportunities for a critical feminist pedagogy in Media Studies.

Chapter 4
Mediating Feminism: Cultivating a (post)feminist Sensibility

Introduction

It is commonly noted by feminist scholars that young women today embody a postfeminist sensibility (see Douglas, 2010; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009 and Negra, 2009). Although true, it is an important reminder to note that the girls in this particular study not only embody a postfeminist sensibility but have no experience other than that of a postfeminist culture – many of them were born and raised during the 1990s and thus experienced the boom in consumer culture and technology which was part of the formation of a shift to postfeminism. In an attempt to combat the media narratives which normalise postfeminist thinking, some have argued that 'a feminist pedagogy...brought directly into the classrooms for teenage girls and boys is an urgent requirement' (McRobbie, 2011: xiv). In chapter 1, I asked whether it was possible that Media Studies classrooms could be sites for the renewal of a feminist sensibility. The following chapter seeks to answer this question by exploring the existence of feminist (and postfeminist) dialogues in both the classroom and in the experiences of the students involved in this research. Each section addresses students' responses to various feminist debates. In some cases, female students do conform to the established characteristics of postfeminism (for instance when speaking of adult women's freedom and choice) but in other cases students exhibit a more complex understanding of the relationship between gender and media which is often in opposition to postfeminism (such as their ambition to gain financial success and maintain a career outside the domestic sphere). The bracketing of 'post' in the title of this chapter is intended to question the extent of students' postfeminist thinking, and to consider the ways in which Media Studies may in part be responsible for the renewal of a feminist insight.

4.1 Girlhood versus Womanhood

One recurrent theme that emerged through the interviews was the distinct ways in which students spoke about girls and women. Generally, girls are seen as

impressionable, vulnerable, and easily influenced by representations in the media. This was evident in key remarks during most interviews. For instance Heather, an AS student at St Mary's said, 'a lot of people do look at the magazines and compare themselves...which makes young women, like teenagers, feel bad about themselves because in the media they're telling everyone what you ought to look like'. Heather acknowledged that media attempt to target 'everyone' but she specifically mentioned teenagers as an age group which relies on media (or in this particular case, magazines) for definitions of ideal appearance that are subsequently used to measure their own attractiveness. Another student from the same cohort and site, Anne, raised similar concerns: 'Definitely with young girls, they are brought up to take time in their appearance, and it's seeing things like that in the magazines, thinking it's right...they're gonna want to follow that and be that'. Again, there was a specific reference to young girls as being vulnerable to media representations, but in this case Anne also suggested that there are other factors involved besides the media. She discussed how girls 'are brought up', implying that there is a socialisation process which emphasises the importance of appearance throughout childhood, further reinforced by media representations of women. For Natalie, an A2 student at Capulet Court, formal media education is a possible solution in countering the influence from more traditional portrayals of women:

> I think that maybe younger girls need to - Media [Studies] should be something that you start doing a lot younger, rather than like picking it up when you're 16, it should be, like at least a couple of years [before], 'cause people grow up and then they realise the mistakes that they've made by not being who they want to be. And like, changing like, who they are over the years rather than realising like, if they learned media when they were younger, they'd realise that some stuff that they're doing are wrong.

Natalie clearly felt that young girls adopt certain attitudes or behaviours which are in conflict with a more realistic version of themselves, and this is in part due to their engagement with media. The critical thinking developed through A-level media education, for Natalie, is a combatant that should be introduced to girls at a younger age, and used as a preventative measure. This line of thinking is more in concert with traditional feminist rather than postfeminist politics. Students' understanding of girls as a more vulnerable population also connects with a common sense view that continues to guide media policy, media commentary and at times media scholarship. However, what scholarship focusing on children's engagement with media has

shown since the 1980s (and what is missing from the 'common sense view' of the participants in this study), is that children are not simply vulnerable subjects; they demonstrate a much more sophisticated and complex awareness of media than previously considered (see Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2004). Of course we cannot entirely dismiss the notion that children are more vulnerable than adults and that they require greater safeguarding from potentially harmful media messages (such as graphic sexual content, violence, etc.). At the same time, it would be equally problematic to deny children's ability to reinterpret, challenge or negotiate existing media representations.

Discussions relating to adult women take on a very divergent set of values in comparison to ideas expressed about girls and younger women. My interviewees tended to see adult women as more confident and in control when dealing with media representations. There was a greater degree of accountability to which they held women and, as a result, research participants expressed less sympathy for them. In an interview with Cassandra, an A2 student from Capulet Court, she often expressed the idea that women take pleasure in their representation as sexual objects. When discussing what it means to be a feminist, Cassandra made the following comments:

> I know [feminists] think women are portrayed to be sex symbols and some women might look at it and think 'oh no, this is wrong for us to look like this' but I think at the same time, women like it. 'Cause if they were um, advertising on the TV to just be in the kitchen all day and like, fully clothed and everything, they'd think it was boring.

There are several issues here worth further consideration. Cassandra identified the tensions in women's experience, in opposing sexualised representations and simultaneously having a subconscious desire or interest to view such representations. Most interestingly though is what she presented as the only alternative to the sex symbol: the boring, fully clothed housewife. Despite her participation in Media Studies, which teaches students at length about the sexual objectification of women in media, Cassandra seemed to accept and appreciate the business logic behind these sexualised portrayals, and viewed the sole alternative as the return to more traditional, domestic and ultimately less entertaining roles. At another point in the interview, she also mentioned that women use the sex symbol representation 'to their advantage', highlighting that women use their sexuality in intelligent and powerful ways. Similarly, when I spoke with Anne about women who work in the

media, such as models in 'lads' mags' (a specific genre of men's magazines in the UK), she commented on their intelligence and willingness to participate in their own sexualisation:

> When some people say that it's men that force women to do that I think a lot of it is like, women want to, you know, everyone likes the attention...I think that a woman is strong enough to say no to things. Like in photo-shoots if they wanted them to go further than they were, the woman has that strength to say no, but she doesn't in the fact that she knows that it sells, not the fact that they have dominance over her. But it's because the industry is that way she knows that it sells, so she will do that but it kind of got portrayed [in class] that she wouldn't stand up for herself. But we kind of argued that she's quite intelligent because she knows what sells.

Anne's comments were in clear opposition to her earlier statements about the vulnerability of young girls. Despite her concerns for young girls who grow up favouring certain representations over others (based on those most idealised by the media), Anne still maintained that adult women have the strength to reject pressure from their superiors to further sexualise and/or objectify them. Like Cassandra, Anne also found that women are active participants in their sexualisation and in fact they want to be portrayed in this manner because 'everyone likes the attention'. Additionally, she considered these women to be savvy professionals, as they understand market demands and capitalise on them. She showed little understanding of the structural factors that perhaps pressure women in these situations, such as fear of unemployment or the internalisation of messages which principally value women's sexuality and appearance.

Whilst students articulated a postfeminist sensibility in their conceptions of adult women, they seemed to articulate a more traditional feminist voice when considering girls' relationship to media representations. There was a concern that younger girls are being negatively influenced by a limited range of representations, which may lead them to 'feel bad' about themselves or 'make mistakes' as Heather and Natalie mentioned. One would expect that if students expressed such a degree of sympathy for girls and the values with which they are raised to embody, that they would apply a similar degree of sympathy to adult women and attribute their behaviour to the same 'feminine' values previously mentioned. Instead, they viewed adult women as capable of making intelligent and powerful choices – the notion that women are possibly taking part in their own subordination and objectification (as

argued by Douglas, 2010; Gill, 2007 and McRobbie, 2009) is not simply neglected but challenged, as demonstrated earlier by Anne's comments, where she disagreed with her teacher's perspective about the extent to which glamour models choose to be photographed in overtly sexual ways. This style of rhetoric is commonly associated with postfeminist values, which celebrate women's abilities to seek empowerment through making their own choices, 'regardless, it seems of who controls the "choices" available' (Whelehan, 2000: 4). Also reflected in the above comments is another key characteristic of postfeminism: 'the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power' (Gill, 2007: 258). This is given further consideration later in the chapter.

Negra addresses postfeminism's discomfort with womanhood at length, and demonstrates, through detailed analysis of key texts, the media's efforts to '[cast] all women as girls to some extent' (2009: 14). Yet the above comments from students indicate completely separate conceptions of girlhood and womanhood, and students often defended texts which may be seen as attempting to infantilise women. In one lesson with an A2 class from St Mary's, Ms Smith has students analyse a photograph of the actress Blake Lively from an issue of *Vogue* magazine (see Appendix E to view the image). *Vogue* had previously received criticism for the photograph, which was apparently manipulated to reduce the size of Lively's breasts, arguably making her appear more child-like. When discussing this particular lesson with Rose during an interview, she made the following remarks:[61]

> [Blake Lively] didn't look any younger, they just got rid of the cleavage. Ms [Smith] was saying that it infantilizes [her] and um, that a lot of the images in *Vogue* are borderline paedophilia and I didn't really get where she was coming from because I mean, I read *Vogue* sometimes and I've never thought to myself 'oh she looks like a child' unless the photoshoot has been for that reason.

Rose went on to argue that *Vogue* is 'all about being sophisticated' and she noted that 'they don't really want to be associated with blonde hair, big boobs, [and] glamour models'. For Rose, the reduction of cleavage was not an attempt to infantilise Lively but was instead meant to enhance the sophistication and class of

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[61] Unfortunately due to other commitments I was absent from this particular lesson and therefore do not have any field notes to offer as a comparison to Rose's observations.

the photograph, and to align the image with a more 'high-fashion' aesthetic associated with *Vogue*.[62] On one hand, this argument indicates Rose's keen sense of the magazine's overall brand and audience, and is indicative of an appreciation for a representation which she considered more elegant and tasteful than the more commonly seen 'glamour model'. On the other hand, Rose failed to understand (and perhaps failed to be convinced of) the overall point of Ms Smith's lesson: that adult women are often infantilised by media. Part of the issue may be related to the notion that Rose's investments in definitions of beauty and attractiveness prevent her from challenging or questioning the intention behind such fashion images; however, it may simply be that the example Ms Smith chose was unconvincing and required further discussion with students.[63] It should also be noted that this specific lesson took place during the second year of A-levels, when students were meant to be challenged further and to engage more critically with media texts and key concepts.

4.2 Desiring Sexual Subjects

There is a strong implication reflected in Anne's and Cassandra's earlier comments that women, both those who comprise and those who consume media representations, possess a great deal of autonomy and derive a sense of pleasure from their sexualisation. These ideas are very much in keeping with Gill's definition of a postfeminist sensibility, whereby women are considered to be independent decision-makers who have shifted from being sexual objects to 'desiring sexual subjects' (2007: 258). This was also evident in the first observed lesson at Spring Garden. The teacher, Mr Brody, was reviewing and building on gender representation concepts with an A2 class. I quote from my fieldwork diary:

> Five boys and six girls enter Mr Brody's classroom. I realise that I am the only person of colour in the room. There are three rows of tables. All of the girls take their seats at tables in the back row and the boys sit towards the front of the room. I am seated alone by the computer desks

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[62] However, as many outraged bloggers have asked in response to this photograph, 'why are larger breasts considered less fashionable?'

[63] There are no obvious indicators of efforts to infantilize Lively in this particular photograph; her stance and facial expression are not especially child-like (see Appendix E).

> arranged along the windows at the far end. Whilst Mr Brody explains to students the purpose of my visit I notice the film posters covering the walls of the room. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?, X-Men, Spiderman, Blade Runner* – 'where are the posters with female lead characters?', I wonder. Mr Brody tells the students that today's lesson is about representation of gender. 'What do we understand about representation of gender?' he asks them. Rebecca, a pale-skinned girl wearing a white, hooded sweater replies: 'that women are represented in a sexist way'. 'What would that look like?' Mr Brody asks. She points to the *X-Men* poster above the door of the room – the only poster on the wall which includes some female characters. In it, there is an image of Storm, a character played by Halle Berry. She stands to the side of the central male figure in the poster, Wolverine, and wears a fitted black, leather body suit. 'Like that' Rebecca suggests. Leah, laughing, says: 'That's not sexist, it's sexy!' Rebecca corrects herself: 'Well sexual, but not necessarily sexist'.

The initial response Rebecca had when the teacher asked about the representation of gender is that women are represented in a sexist manner. When attempts are made to elaborate on exactly what 'sexist' means, Rebecca's classmate Leah disagreed with her analysis. She interpreted the chosen image to be sexy in a more appreciative way, as opposed to discriminatory and sexist. Rebecca, acknowledging the possibility for interpretation, corrected her earlier statement and instead labelled the image as 'sexual'. This brief exchange summarises the discord between what teachers expect (and often hope) students will take away from lessons and students' half-formed and simplified interpretations of what they believe to be true. Later in the lesson, Mr Brody stated that 'mainstream media is broadly sexist, in other words, women are represented as subordinated, secondary characters and their sexual characteristics are often the most important' which confirms the general understanding he expected students to grasp about representation of gender (and women more specifically). In an effort to persuade students, he went on to discuss the presence of women in the workforce.

> Mr Brody asks the students: 'How many women are in the cabinet? In David Cameron's cabinet?' There is a brief silence. A few students murmur guesses under their breath. He answers his own question: 'There are only four. That's less than twenty percent. How many should there be?' Kylie, a soft-spoken and petite girl with curly brown hair and freckles says, 'It should be fifty-fifty'. Leah disagrees with her: 'Yeah but that's not fair because what if fifty percent of the women that want to do it aren't good enough for the job? Not all women want to be in politics'. I notice at this point that none of the boys have joined in the conversation. 'Is that likely, Leah?' Mr Brody asks. Stephanie supports Leah's point: 'Yeah it's kind of like the

police force it's a bit unfair that mainly women are getting in at the moment. I mean it's good that they're getting in but if not that many women are applying why, you know, if the guys prefer to go that road, then –' Jennifer interrupts: 'You can't make it fifty-fifty, I mean what about beauticians? Mostly women get those jobs but then that's unfair for men, that's sexist towards men'.

I already know that I want to interview Jennifer eventually – she is cheerful, outspoken and well-liked by her classmates and Mr Brody. She has an obvious interest in fashion and beauty: her long, caramel hair is teased and styled in to what can be described best as a bird's nest. Though students are required to uphold the school's dress code (dark-coloured trousers and the school tie) most of the girls wear relaxed or casual apparel. Jennifer, on the other hand, dons high-heeled shoes and trendy, fitted clothing. She wears more accessories than the rest of us put together.

Mr Brody finds a brief moment of silence to interject: 'OK, these arguments are interesting ones but I don't want to go in that direction today. I would say that fifty percent is a reasonable figure, there may be reasons why that figure isn't practical. OK, I accept that maybe women just don't want to do it; maybe some women just aren't good enough to do it. But then you have to go into the question of whether they just haven't been *socialised* to want to do it. Then you might have to ask questions of why there haven't been opportunities for women to *become* good at it. But I don't want to go into it right now. As a rule of thumb, let's just say that fifty percent of positions should be for women. What effect can that have on women, if so few of them are in positions of power?'

Despite efforts to connect representation of women in media to representation of women in the workforce, some of the female students in the class continued to question the notion of equality in the workplace based on postfeminist ideas of individual choice, at least as they understood it when articulated by this teacher. Mr Brody did attempt to offer some counter arguments but these were briefly mentioned and not given enough consideration or explanation. This was evidenced later in the lesson when another female student tried once again to make the point that women may not have an interest in certain fields. With a stern tone, he replied: 'I don't want to get into that right now – you might be right but that's a different question'. Though class time is limited and teachers must ensure they cover the relevant material, the above exchanges reflect the need for a conversation to occur which first addresses why such disparities exist in the workforce between men and women and also how such inequalities might be connected to media and their representation of gender.

A possible explanation for the resistance which Mr Brody faced from his students may be related to their understanding of gender and biological sex. In all three sites, teachers introduced gender representation with an exercise that assists students in distinguishing between gender and biological sex. This usually involved separately listing associations made of men and women. The following field note excerpt describes one of these lessons in greater detail:

> On our walk to this morning's class, Ms Farooq explains that there is a clear divide between social groups: Neil, Lewis and Debbie completed their previous grades at a different (local) school and transferred to Capulet Court for their A-levels, whereas the other five students attended Capulet Court from an earlier age. When we enter the room, the social divide is visibly apparent. The desks are arranged in a single, long row. Three students who I realise are Neil, Lewis and Debbie are seated on one end of the row and another five students sit on the other end. The students here have costly, upholstered office chairs to sit on. Many of them swivel side-to-side throughout the lesson. Ms Farooq encourages me to sit behind the three 'outsiders' as she predicts that Neil and Lewis in particular will have some 'very interesting things to say' during today's lesson.
>
> The working class background of Neil, Lewis and Debbie was something I later noticed Ms Farooq found both endearing and challenging. She often adopted their local Southern slang and diction in a playful effort to relate to them. As a young, petite, Muslim woman of South Asian background, she enjoyed confronting their very racist and sexist values simply through embodying multiple qualities that Neil and Lewis had never previously considered possible. Ms Farooq explained to me that she was often the first non-white teacher and/or person of authority with whom these students interacted. Simply by presenting herself as a well-educated, in fashion and fun Muslim woman, Ms Farooq felt she was shattering many of their preconceptions around Muslims, women and ethnic minorities. I considered how, as a young, Indo-Canadian woman, my presence in the classroom might also shape or in some cases censor students' responses – especially students like Neil and Lewis.
>
> 'What I'd like you to do is, could you get a pen and paper out please? Individually, so don't work with the person next to you, can you list the typical characteristics or features of a man and a woman? It could be physique, it could be personality uh, it could be any kind of characteristics. Just make one list for women and one for men'. Students work quietly for five minutes whilst Ms Farooq walks down the long, row of desks.

At Spring Garden and Capulet Court, students were then asked to identify which associations were learned behaviours and/or traits, and which were biological. During this point in the activity, students became increasingly argumentative (and

clever) about whether or not traits were learned. For instance, a male student from Spring Garden said that 'technology and computers is something men are biologically better at than women'. Though it is obvious that this remark was made in a teasing, provocative and supposedly comical manner, these types of sexist jokes often suggest an underlying mode of thinking which identifies men as having a 'natural' skill within certain domains (such as technology).[64] At Capulet Court, students debated about whether men and women are genetically predisposed to take on roles of providers and child-carers (respectively) or whether the adoption of these roles is the result of certain social and cultural forces. This was highlighted by a conversation between Neil and Lewis, from the same lesson described above:

> 'There is no such thing as a good or bad mum, it's instinct [for a woman] to care for a child, how to feed that child, how to nurture it' Neil says. Debbie agrees, 'Yeah like, when a baby cries, the mum always gets up and the man never does'. 'That's because he has work in the morning' Lewis explains. The class erupts in laughter. Ms Farooq places her hands on her hips, tilts her head to the side whilst glaring at Lewis.

> Jeff, one of the boys from the other end of the table, contributes to the conversation: 'But a man can mother a child. Like you have single dads and stuff'. Looking at the black boards filled with students' brainstormed lists, Ms Farooq says, 'Interesting. OK let's move on'. Reading from the board she asks: "Men are protectors" – is that biological or learnt?' Neil answers without hesitation: 'Biological'. 'Why, Neil?' she too responds immediately. 'It's more natural for a man to be the provider and protector. He's naturally bigger and more likely to be stronger and able to protect rather than –' 'The other way around?' she guesses. 'Yeah' Neil replies.

The 'resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference' that Neil indicated in his comments is another hallmark of postfeminism (Gill, 2007: 254). Although the activity was meant to teach students about the difference between gender and sex and the extent to which our identity as either man or woman is socially constructed, the lesson often resulted in some students (especially boys) attempting to prove the opposite. There is no denying the value of such an activity. Many interviewees

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[64] Turkle (1986) and Henwood (2000) have written extensively about how technology, and computers in particular, have come to be seen as inherently masculine fields. Even men within these fields describe their female colleagues and peers as non-experts despite receiving the same training (see Henwood, 2000: 219-220).

admitted that prior to this lesson, they were not aware of precisely what gender meant, or how it differed from one's biological sex. This point alone defends the necessity of the exercise. However, if some students end the lesson continuing to deny the extensive reach of gender as a social construct, there is a greater risk that they will struggle later in the subject to identify gender stereotypes represented by the media and instead view these stereotypes as linked to a set of 'natural' gender roles. This example also builds on the previous recommendation that there should be a greater focus on some of the fundamental points about gender equality in work.

The depth at which these fundamental concepts were covered is not the only explanation for students' attitudes. In his interview, Mr Brody pointed to a larger change in the way female students negotiated with the gender representation section of the curriculum.

> Steph [Ms Davies] and I have a very similar experience 'cause we're in the same institution. But both of us are finding that...there is very much a sense of um, young women, girls, becoming much more independent and confident in themselves, and indeed outperforming boys at GCSE, and at A-level and that's still going ahead. What both of us anecdotally feel is it's going backwards in terms of the media as a whole. In terms of representation of gender, we do seem to be going back, even you know, maybe not as bad as the 70s, but the horribly sexist representation, this whole idea of celeb culture, seems to me to be extremely regressive. And it does appear to be affecting the young girls in terms of, they find it very - obviously not all, it depends on their background, but sort of, as a group, find it very difficult to challenge these ideas of what it is to be sexually attractive, what it is to be feminine, and so on...Whereas in the past, in the classroom, we'd raise never as a sort of on the soapbox 'you shouldn't do this or you shouldn't do that' raise the issue for discussion, it was always something that the girls would lean forward to: 'this makes sense, I like this idea' but now it's sort of a lean back: 'what are they on about?'

Mr Brody raised some important issues worth further consideration. The academic achievements of female students would suggest that in many ways the young women of today are excelling. Though this is true regarding their academic performance there are deeper concerns that these students fail to challenge or 'question the criteria on which they're being judged' by the media (Ms Davies, 2011). As Mr Brody suggested, part of the reason for this lack of questioning is related to the extent to which young women are invested in today's media and, in particular, their investments in celebrity culture. The comparison between his past students, whom

Mr Brody found were more willing to embrace critiques of popular culture, and the girls he currently teaches, who are not simply ambivalent about the critiques but in many ways opposed to them, signals the shift to postfeminism and the struggles teachers face in their efforts to engage students in a critical analysis of these representations and also perhaps in finding a new language to reach a new generation of girls.[65]

4.3 Anti-retreatism and the De-valuation of the Domestic Goddess

Following on from Cassandra's earlier remarks about boring, fully-clothed housewives, there was a more general consensus from students that domestic work is less valuable than more 'professional' labour in the workplace. This is inconsistent with what Negra considers 'one of postfeminism's master narratives': 'retreatism' (2009: 5). Retreatism attempts to 'shepherd women out of the public sphere' by celebrating the triumphs of returning to domestic work in the home (ibid.). As Negra's (2009) thorough analysis of film, television and print adverts reveals, retreatism and domesticity have been naturalised by a variety of media narratives in recent years. Despite the prevalence of such narratives in current popular media, the young women in this study articulated not only a strong desire to develop careers and gain economic independence, but also a rejection of retreatist thinking. Charlotte, an AS student at St Mary's, described the role of women today in comparison to more traditional times:

> Back when God knows when, all women were like, stay at home and look after the kids, cook for the husband and do everything, they didn't really have much of a role in society whereas nowadays...even though they are expected to do such things, they've got much more of a role to play.

Charlotte equated domestic labour with lacking a societal 'role' – in other words, her definition of contributing to society primarily involves participation in the workforce. Other students expressed a similar form of disdain for domestic work. When asked to identify a good role model Judith, an A2 student from Spring Garden, spoke about her divorced mother whom she considered a good role model

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[65] Mr Brody never clarified the time lapse between his 'past students' and his 'current students' so it is unclear to what extent his recollection of 'the past' is

because of her ability to work and financially support herself and her children. She went on to say, 'I don't want to be stuck at home and I don't want to be a housewife. I want to make my own money so that I can support myself rather than having to rely on someone'. In fact most students chose celebrity role models based on their financial success and independence, such as Emma Watson, whom Natalie admired because she 'came from absolutely nowhere and is now one of the most rich teenagers in the world'. As with Charlotte's perception that women in the domestic sphere are without a societal role, Natalie also implied that Emma Watson lacked significance (she was 'nowhere') which was eventually resolved through her financial success. She also expressed a desire to one day make more money than her husband, because it would mean that she '[would] have more power'.[66] It is also worth noting that the apparent yearning in the above remarks for wealth is very much connected to a broader desire for recognition which seems to be embodied powerfully by fame and celebrity.

The above statements are all reflections which convey not only a great desire for earning money and gaining recognition through participation in the workforce, but also a devaluation of domestic labour. These values are indicative of what I would term an 'anti-retreatist' sentiment which many young women in this study embraced. In terms of attitudes towards domestic labour, students were mostly influenced by their mothers and other female relatives rather than postfeminist representations of women. That is not to say the influence is always positive. Jennifer, an A2 student from Spring Garden, provided some of the most intriguing comments about ideas of domesticity, professional labour, and gender equality. In this excerpt from our interview, she expressed her frustrations with the division of labour in her home:

> I'm not just going to be a housewife, I will go to work and I do think that a lot of the roles should be shared...With something like cooking a meal, you know, they [men] could do it half the time. If I would be working then they could do half of the things 'cause they're just as

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nostalgic as opposed to accurate.

[66] It is worth noting that Natalie seemed unaware of Watson's very privileged upbringing. As the daughter of two English lawyers with access to resources such as acting lessons from a reputable theatre arts school in Oxford, one could hardly conclude that she 'came from absolutely nowhere'.

> capable. 'Cause I do I think, 'what's the difference?' There is no difference. My mum always says about my brother 'but he's a lad' and I'm like 'yeah but he's still got two hands' you know [laughs]?! I think a lot of the older people like my mum, in particular, she does all the cooking and...she goes to work and she does all the cleaning, yet my dad just goes to work. And he works a lot but I still think 'why isn't he capable of cooking?'

Jennifer, along with many interviewees, expressed an apparent desire to participate in the professional sphere. Despite having parents who both work outside the home, she articulated her dissatisfaction with the unequal division of household work, which is completed largely by her and her mother. For the girls I interviewed, domestic labour does not have the same romanticised appeal found in retreatist narratives.

It is encouraging to hear these young women speak about gender equality in the home and about their desire to participate in the workforce, as it signals their growing awareness of such issues. That is not to say their understanding is without limitations. Although Jennifer did recognise the gender inequalities within her family, she admitted a lack of awareness concerning the gender inequalities in the workplace. As she put it: 'until a recent lesson in media, we all thought that women were totally equal now...we all thought it was legal that we had to be paid [the same as men]'. Charlotte indicated learning a similar lesson in her college: 'we learned that women, even if they have the same job of a man...they'll still get paid less...I find that a bit sexist'. These comments point towards what Ms Davies calls in her interview 'the myth of equality'; the ultimate marker of postfeminism. Prior to these lessons which aimed to 'de-mystify' the notion of gender equality, students were very much caught up in what McRobbie terms 'double entanglement' (2004), assuming that all feminist battles for equality are won. Jennifer acknowledged her and her female classmates' lack of awareness with the following remark: '...when Sir was saying we're badly represented and we have it hard and we were all saying "we don't, we don't" I guess we're starting to realise that it's something we don't even know about'.

Although students articulate determination to obtain professional careers and participate in the workforce, a subtle form of patriarchy persists at times in their choices and speech. Nowhere was this clearer than in Jennifer's description of her professional ambitions. She explained that at the age of ten her initial desire was to

become a dentist, after having witnessed the achievements of her own (male) dentist. It was after a more recent 'work experience' programme where she observed a (female) dental hygiene therapist, that she became more interested in dental hygiene therapy as a career.

> Divya: Is that, dental hygiene therapy, different from standard dentistry?
>
> Jennifer: Yeah 'cause [for] dentistry [you need] three As...whereas [dental hygiene therapy] is more like Bs and Cs which - you do a lot - but it's not a five year course. It's a three year course so it's a bit, and I'd rather it to be honest 'cause I wouldn't want to do five years, especially not with all the fees.
>
> Divya: And when you come out of that what would your role be in a dental practice?
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> Jennifer: I could do like, you know, like fillings...I can extract teeth, do the check-ups and things like that. But [not] anything, you know, like nerves and going deeper...So it's basically take the load off the dentist and he could do all the serious things that, to be honest, I wouldn't want to do anyways. But he'd get - well even now I'm saying 'he'- *they'd* get more money at the end of it.

There is a tone of inferiority in Jennifer's comments regarding her capabilities as both a student and potential dentist. Though perhaps she genuinely would prefer to pursue dental hygiene therapy it is plausible that doubts in her ability to achieve the required grades and to succeed in a more rigorous, lengthy and costly course have brought about the recent career change. After nearly completing her A-levels Jennifer continued to ascribe certain gendered assumptions to these professions, where male dentists perform the more 'serious' work and female dental hygiene therapists' actions are defined in relation to the dentists'. In other words, her role is one of assistance: to 'take the load off the dentist' as Jennifer put it. Negra has discussed how so-called 'feminised' professions have been depicted in postfeminist media narratives where, she argues, 'chick flick protagonists' are often 'situated in a low-paying, low-status (though often nurturing...) mode of employment' (2009: 86). Jennifer's distinction between the male dentist and female dental hygiene therapist confirms that she continued to perceive certain professions as inherently masculine or feminine. It may be a credit to the knowledge gained in Media Studies that eventually she recognised and corrected the gendered assumption she made linguistically by replacing the pronoun 'he' with 'they'. To gain such an awareness of one's speech is very much an initial step towards further equality.

In contrast to feminised professions there are of course many industries and professions that are viewed as inherently masculine by students. This was most evident at St Mary's, where Ms Smith introduced the gender representation unit by asking students to solve a popular yet enlightening riddle. Students were asked to read the following story in their handbooks, and to try and solve it independently: 'A father and his son were in a car accident. The father died. The son was taken to the hospital. The doctor came in and said: I cannot treat this boy, because he's my son. Who was the doctor?' In both classes where this lesson took place, only two or three students correctly solved the riddle.[67] Other students provided complex solutions, identifying the doctor as the boy's stepfather or, in one case, a student considered that the boy had gay parents and the doctor was his other father. When Ms. Smith finally revealed that the doctor was in fact the boy's mother, students immediately reacted with a number of explanations for their over-sight. In the following excerpt from field notes I show how Ms Smith attempted to explain the relationship of the activity to media and gender representation:

> 'The media tells us why certain people should belong to certain groups' she begins. 'And it's not just categorising people it's also encouraging us to believe certain things about certain people. So what was the thing you were encouraged to believe about doctors?' Chris, an AS student sitting at the cluster of desks in the far corner, offers a guess: 'That they were all men?' Ms Smith elaborates, 'Yeah you were encouraged to believe by the media that all doctors are male'. I wonder: 'But surely the media is only one of many social structures responsible for shaping those beliefs, right?' 'And the key there is that it's *unconscious*' Ms Smith continues. 'Unconsciously we learn to accept it as normal. And that's why you couldn't figure it out. You couldn't conceptualise the doctor as female in that circumstance'. She starts to raise her voice, 'and, therefore, so *strongly* do you categorise in that way that you *exclude* alternatives, you *excluded* the alternative option, didn't you?' Each 'exclude' is louder and longer than the last. 'You *excluded* the alternative option of "oh it could've been a women". You all *completely excluded* that as an option'. Franchesca, coming to the rescue of her peers, raises her hand. Ms Smith nods at her: 'Yeah?' Franchesca suggests in a barely audible voice: 'But what if it was like the mother driving? Wouldn't we have then been confused about who the doctor was too?' Ms Smith sharply retorts:

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[67] Melanie, one of the few who correctly answered the question, explained later in our interview that she had previously heard the riddle in her English class (where she was unable to solve it).

'Would you have? If I said a mother and her son were driving, they got into a car accident the mother was killed. The doctor walks in the room and says "I cannot treat this patient, he's my son" would you have said "oh the doctor's a woman" then?!' A number of students side with Ms Smith in a resounding set of 'no's. Joseph offers another rationale: 'I think it's all to do with how it's written because it says "*son*" then you're thinking about boys and then it says "*he's* in the room" so you're thinking boy again so you're not meant to be thinking about girls'. Ms Smith glances over at me, smirking. She seems to have calmed down now. 'Yeah but you're still relying on the fact that you have these expectations otherwise it wouldn't have worked. So I understand what you're saying, Joseph, but I'm not fully convinced'.

In a later interview, Ms Smith confirmed that the above scenario is the common reaction students have to the 'doctor riddle'. Many like Joseph resorted to blaming the phrasing of the riddle, claiming that the use of masculine terms such as 'father', 'boy' and 'son' had led them to associate 'doctor' as masculine. Few students were willing to admit or even partly consider that they still maintained a degree of sexism in their assumptions about certain professions. When asked about this lesson several months later during interviews, students were more willing to consider how their values had been shaped by the media to associate doctors with the male gender.

4.4 I'm not a feminist but...

Until now, this chapter has explored mainly covert feminist and postfeminist discussions in the classroom and in interviews which have taken place as secondary to another issue or topic. There are, however, moments from interviews and observed lessons which focus specifically on defining and understanding feminism. It is with this in mind that the final section of the chapter turns to a discussion of how feminism is explicitly addressed and conceived of by teachers and students.

The postfeminist myth of equality that has become normalised in today's culture has also produced what many scholars define as not only ambivalence but outright repudiation of feminism (see McRobbie, 2004). Feminists are blamed for their attempt to silence women's natural desires to be feminine or to choose the home over the workplace. Even the word feminism has been labelled in some spheres as the new 'F-word', simply too obscene to say out loud and in full (Tasker and Negra, 2007: p. 3). In order to understand where students situate themselves in relation to the feminist label each interviewee was asked first, how they would define feminism and second, whether they would call themselves feminists. Though

responses ranged from common definitions[68] to complete inability to define the term none of the fifteen students expressed outright repudiation or emphatic acceptance of the feminist label. This appears rather odd when considering the adamant stance on equality in both the home and the workplace which many of the girls expressed during our interviews. Many students who felt they were not feminists did not deny their support of and belief in gender equality and often admitted to possessing a degree of feminist thinking, but cited an altogether different reason for not taking on the label themselves. When asked the question 'would you ever call yourself a feminist?' Rose, Judith, Laura and Melanie responded with the following remarks:

> Rose: No. I think that I'm opinionated on it...but I wouldn't call myself a feminist because I do, you know, I do accept that it doesn't really matter what I do. Probably nothing will be done but like, yeah 'cause I guess who's gonna listen to a 17 year old girl?...I wouldn't actively go out and like do something about it. It just annoys me a little bit.

> Judith: Um I think I'd say no...I wouldn't personally go out and, like, protest and try and get everyone to be equal...

> Laura: No...Well I'm not, not against patriarchy but I don't feel the need to rise up and speak for rights or whatever.

> Melanie: It depends, like, I don't think I'd go out and start a public demonstration or anything...

These comments are only a few examples of the ways in which students defined feminists as those who participate in political action. For them, being a feminist means actively protesting against patriarchy. Regardless of their apparent feminist opinions they felt unable to identify as feminists because of their lack of participation in marches, protests or other forms of 'active' feminist coalitions. In one respect it is promising to see that these young women define feminists as, above all else, active citizens who demand positive change. However, because of this line of thinking, they disassociate themselves from a feminist identity and furthermore see any type of action as ultimately futile – this was most evident in Rose's comments (i.e. 'who's gonna listen to a 17 year old girl?').

Budgeon (2011) offers some explanation for the lack of young women's attachment to a feminist identity. Drawing on the previous work of Heywood and Drake (2004), Budgeon notes that '[n]ew levels of gender parity in educational

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[68] For example, Billie defined feminism as 'wanting everyone to be equal' and Kylie said it is a 'movement of liberation for women'.

attainment and occupational success mean that women are as likely, or perhaps even more likely, to identify with their *generation* than their *gender'* (2011: 280, emphasis in original). In these instances, 'a feminism which relies upon intergenerational identification is less effective than one which speaks to newly forming feminine subjectivities' (ibid). If true, students' disidentification with feminism may be the result of a view which 'does not privilege gender or sexual difference as a key site of struggle' (ibid). Rather than cast patriarchy as the 'enemy' these young women see any discourse which threatens to standardise their pluralistic and contradictory identities as an object of critique. Even feminism comes under such critique:

> Melanie: ... feminists are kind of like, you know, they don't actually take into consideration how the women themselves feel. 'Cause someone might be content as housewives or lookin' a certain way, but they just kind of think 'oh it's not OK for women to take the subordinate position'. They don't actually consider how the people feel. 'Cause they might feel good about that being a good representation of them and yeah. I dunno people have different views about it.

Melanie was the only student in this research who at the time of the interview could identify and (loosely) define several feminist positions such as Marxist, radical and liberal feminism. She claimed to have learned about these positions in her sociology class. Despite the comments she made earlier (reproduced above), she went on to qualify her statements by explaining that she would call herself a liberal feminist because she 'think[s] women should have more rights' but would not identify as a radical or Marxist feminist, positions that she described as 'too extreme'. The value she places on consideration for alternative 'feelings' signals what Budgeon would identify as third-wave feminism which promotes a 'politics of difference' starting with 'the specificity of individual experience' (ibid.: 282). In fact most students' concern for individuality outweighed any preoccupations with women in more collective terms and also explains their lack of interest in feminist activism. Since at the core of third-wave discourse is an emphasis on self-definition, any attempts to advance a politics which is representative of all women becomes unnecessary (ibid.: 283). The focus instead shifts to the development of 'the individual and emotional' rather than participation in collective protests, marches and/or legislation reform (Rosenberg and Garofalo, 1998: 810). Melanie stressed the importance of both the

emotional and the individual by first describing the limitations of feminism in terms of 'neglecting women's feelings' and then referencing people's 'different views'.

Though a third-wave mode of thinking may in part be responsible for students' lack of interest in feminist activism, it is also possible that some students share a desire for collective action but are uncertain of their ability to succeed. Later in our interview, Rose explained why she was not more vocal about her opinions:

> It is more male than female in our class and [gender inequality] doesn't affect [the boys] so they don't really do anything about it. 'Cause I know that a couple of the girls in the class do feel the same way that I do but they just don't really want to do anything about it because there aren't enough of us.

Though many students agreed that representations of women in media needed to change and that more generally speaking women have not yet achieved equality, they were unsure of how they might go about expressing those beliefs and whether any real change would result from their actions.

These comments point to a contradictory set of beliefs which students hold. On one hand, they reject the feminist label because they interpret the feminist agenda as too narrow to allow for their more pluralistic values. Yet, on the other hand, students also admit that women have better chances of bringing about change if they are in larger, unified groups. One method for resolving these conflicting views would be to provide a more detailed exploration of feminism within Media Studies classes. Since feminism is not a required element of Media Studies specifications, the extent to which it is addressed in the classroom ranges from not at all (Capulet Court) to somewhat (St Mary's). Ms Farooq, the teacher at Capulet Court, admitted to not teaching about feminism 'in enough depth' largely because it did not feature on the exam. The only time the feminist label was brought into the classroom was when discussing certain texts. For instance, films such as *Charlie's Angels* and *Sex and the City* were considered feminist texts whilst certain celebrities such as Madonna and Britney Spears were identified as feminist icons. Feminism in these circumstances is used as a blanket term for categorising media that celebrates the 'emancipated' woman. What is lacking further analysis here is whether these representations are truly (and consistently) emblematic of emancipation. Labelling these texts and figures as feminist is a quick and superficial way of categorising representations but would arguably add further confusion to students' conceptions of what feminism means. At Spring Garden, Ms Davies and Mr Brody raised certain

issues for discussion which are very much a part of feminist concerns but these lessons were not framed as explicitly about feminism. Part of the reason for this may be the educators' own discomfort, as Ms Davies explained: 'I mean it's also the case of course that I struggle with the idea of what feminism is'. Ms Smith was the only educator in this study who expressed an interest in bringing feminism into the classroom:

> Believe it or not I do discuss [feminism] and I establish their values first. Uh, especially with the lads because also they believe that feminists can only be women as well and that's another misconception they have... But the word has become so maligned that even students are aware that it's a dirty word... And that's why they...distance themselves from the word itself. But if you actually talk about the values of feminism and don't call it by its name, so 'let's have a consensus do we think men and women should be – yeah, yeah' and you just go through all the values, and 'well that means then that you're all feminists'. And the boys are recoiling in horror at the idea of being called a feminist. And again that's a part of bringing them smack up against inconsistencies in their own thinking, that they think feminists are this thing.

Ms Smith also used some 'feminist' literature to support her classroom activities. For instance, in a lesson where students conducted their own content analysis of *Kerrang!* magazine, Ms Smith provided an article from the UK online feminist magazine, *The F-Word*, which explores the under-representation of female artists within *Kerrang!*. Later in the lesson, she distributed copies of another article to students which addresses the Riot Grrrl movement and the history of 'girl power'. These lessons were perhaps part of the reason why interviewees from Ms Smith's classes were better able to define feminism than students from Spring Garden or Capulet Court (who in some cases could not explain feminism at all). Despite Ms Smith's efforts, however, students still came away from these lessons with a view of feminism as an extreme movement, demonstrated by the poorly formatted 'girl power' article Ms Smith re-produced for her students to read. The article was meant to offer readers an explanation of how Riot Grrrls functioned as a social and political statement. In the version Ms Smith produced she edited the article by 'pasting' several sections, found on separate pages in the original, on to a single page (see Appendix F). In this edited version which the students read, the article falsely concluded with the following, un-cited statement: '...the Riot Grrrls' "unifying principle is that being feminist is inherently confusing and contradictory, and that

women have to find a way to be sexy, angry, and powerful at the same time"' (in Gonick, 2008: 312). What Ms Smith excluded from these copies was the crucial point that Gonick was quoting from a *Rolling Stone* article to demonstrate how mainstream media had '[dismissed] the seriousness of the Riot Grrrl movement' and '[positioned] feminism as the element of complication' (ibid.). Without this context, students came away from the reading with the perception that Gonick herself offered this apparently valid assessment of the Riot Grrrl movement. Based on this mis-interpretation of Gonick's writing it is no wonder that, later in our interview, Rose had commented: 'with the whole Riot Grrrls thing...I think they took it a bit too far. And it did get them noticed but I think that going about things rationally is better than extremists'.

In accordance with previous research, the girls in this study also demonstrated hesitation to adopt a feminist identity yet none of the interviewees expressed an outright repudiation of the term. Instead, they either did not fully understand what feminism meant or felt that their views were too diverse to be included in a feminist agenda. Though feminism was in many ways implicitly present during lessons, a more upfront approach which explicitly addresses the underlying arguments of different strands of feminism would be helpful in expanding students' understanding of the term. This is somewhat problematic since not all educators are equipped to teach about feminism and since exam boards do not prioritise feminism as an essential part of the Media Studies curriculum. The current fragmented state of feminism also creates issues for developing content which effectively captures the 'constant evolutionary movement of feminism' (Budgeon, 2001: 13-14). Educators should more carefully consider their use of teaching resources which may further demonise feminism and ultimately reinforce stereotypes about feminists (such as the poorly edited 'girl power' reading). The latter suggestion would seem especially relevant considering that the representation section of the curriculum is meant to expose stereotypes which are perpetuated by media as opposed to reinforce them. Despite students' disassociation from feminism they do inhabit a third-wave feminist mode which privileges self-definition and individuality. Their hesitation to participate in feminist activism might in some ways frame these 'young women as depoliticised actors' (ibid.: 14). In spite of this, we also might consider how the construction of their identities can be understood as 'a

reflexive engagement with the limitations of hegemonic forms of feminism' and as a way of 'expressing a politicised agency within conditions of late modernity' (ibid.). This is especially apparent when discussing their external appearance, which is addressed further in the following chapter.

Conclusion

The Media Studies classroom at A-level provides some opportunities for girls to consider representations in a critical manner and to develop a stronger feminist voice. Students express a great deal of concern for younger girls and the ways in which sexualised representations negatively affect them. In some cases, they articulate the same concerns of feminist scholars who have cited the necessity of a feminist pedagogy as a means of providing young teenagers with 'ammunition...to deal with...their uncertainties about how to engage with this pornographic popular culture' (McRobbie, 2011: xiv). Interviewees were very much opposed to the retreatist narrative, and instead articulated a determination to participate in the professional sphere and gain economic independence.

There seems to be certain limitations in terms of content and in terms of students' willingness to embrace consciousness-raising efforts by educators. For instance, the transition from girlhood to womanhood is one which requires further explanation and exploration in formal media education. Students employed a postfeminist sensibility in their understanding of adult women who, in their view, are completely capable of making independent choices and in some cases, take pleasure in their sexualisation and use their appearance and sexuality in powerful and intelligent ways. Additionally, some (male) students tended to adopt an essentialist view of gender which reasserts sexual difference – as demonstrated by certain classroom discussions. Though lessons are helpful in identifying and distinguishing between gender and biological sex, further efforts should be made to clarify how gender is socially constructed, and to identify the role of media in naturalising gender differences. This would possibly help to build a stronger awareness of how students internalise and apply these gender differences when creating their own expectations (as was the case with Jennifer's assumptions about dentists and students' reaction to the 'doctor riddle'). Though feminist concerns were raised in the classroom they were rarely identified as such. This has contributed to students' weak and sometimes

incorrect conceptions of feminism. A more comprehensive discussion of feminism in the classroom would be of benefit to students; however, this is complicated by the fact that feminism is not on the agenda for Media Studies specifications. It is evident that Media Studies has created many opportunities which, at the very least, improve students' awareness of a double entanglement and assist in the cultivation of a feminist sensibility. However, the A-level Media Studies classroom has, by no means, perfected a curriculum which includes critical feminist pedagogy

Chapter 5
Being Ourselves: Standing Out, Fitting In and Looking Good

Introduction

On the basis of comments from teachers and students in previous chapters, it is apparent that Media Studies affords a greater sense of autonomy in comparison to other subjects. Nonetheless, the conclusions drawn in chapter 3 also demonstrate how certain constraints continue to restrict educators and students. These constraints impede young women's cultivation of a feminist sensibility (as explored in chapter 4) and also mediate students' critical development (as will be described in chapter 6). This chapter attempts to explain how Media Studies also works to reinforce girls' focus on their appearance by over-emphasising the analysis of women's physical representation. This is evidenced through the ways that girls understand ideas of 'being yourself' and 'self-esteem' as largely grounded in the physical. Despite their awareness of the heavily constructed nature of women's representations students continue to value and desire these unattainable ideals indicating that the knowledge they gain in the classroom does not dispel their pursuit of certain types of feminine beauty but may in fact reinforce such pursuits. Also considered in the final section of this chapter are the ways in which content reinforces a binary mode of thinking about gender by limiting analysis to heterosexual male and female representations. This in turn hinders students' ability to conceive of gender in more pluralistic terms and is a helpful example of how classroom content could be updated to explore alternative representations of men and women (which, specifically for women, would focus on aspects other than the physical).

The chapter begins by highlighting students' conflicting interest in pursuing an authentic version of themselves through a narrow frame of expectations. In other words, their desire for individuality and authenticity exists in tension with their investments in narrow beauty ideals too often located in the media. Many students express a desire to stand out from others, to avoid being labelled by their peers and to avoid certain trends or celebrities. Though asserting their individuality in relation to their appearance is an important part of their identity, expressing non-conformist

views be it in the classroom or elsewhere is of less significance. This chapter also considers how the over-emphasis on visual aspects of women's representation may play a role in their hesitation to express non-conformist ideas in the classroom. I consider how, through allowing students more opportunities to challenge and question content, they can attain a greater sense of authenticity located beyond the physical self. The notion of self-esteem, which is defined by students as being connected mainly to confidence derived from their appearance, is discussed towards the end of this chapter. Many of those interviewed felt that 'looking good' leads to 'feeling good' or feeling confident, confidence leads to stronger social connections and networks, which ultimately leads to greater happiness and success.

The focus on analysing women's appearance in Media Studies is not entirely problematic and may in some cases be rather beneficial. Students express a sense of gratitude in learning about the extent of editing and manipulation which goes into producing images of ideal beauty, which they find helpful in minimizing expectations for themselves and in creating a greater degree of separation between media images of women and actual women. Despite this knowledge, some students are still unsatisfied with their appearance (especially their weight and/or body shape), demonstrating their strong attachments to Western beauty ideals. Ultimately, the question this chapter intends to discuss is the following: is it possible that other aspects of girls' subjectivity are getting lost because of their focus on adornment, or, should we celebrate their creativity and desire to be individual even if it is mainly in relation to their appearance?

5.1 Authenticating Acts and Being Who You Are

In describing young people's modes of self-production, Maguire and Stanway note that 'young adults negotiate the competing demands of forging an identity in a consumer society – to fit in and be accepted, but at the same time to stand out as an individual' (2008: 65). Though attempts to balance between these 'competing demands' may create some anxiety, students resolved this tension by honouring their 'true' identity as one of ultimate value in their self-production. This was especially evidenced when students were asked to identify good and bad female role models. The rationale provided for why certain celebrities were considered good role models often related to their honesty and that they remained 'true to who they

are' as opposed to bad role models who were 'fake'. The extent to which these role models were deemed genuine or fake, however, was largely based on external factors. For instance, Laura cited Crystal Renn as an example of a good role model, because of her plus size figure. Alternatively, Judith commented extensively about Amy Childs – a reality television celebrity whom she considered to be 'fake' because of her 'perfect figure' and surgically-enhanced breasts. 'I think she's trying to be something that she's not', was how Judith summarised her concerns.

Similarly, when asked about their own representation, students often focused on avoiding attempts to mimic or follow others. As Charlotte noted, 'I'm just me really...I don't try to fit into any specific categories' which she went on to qualify by listing examples of clothing in her wardrobe belonging to diverse fashion trends and styles. There is 'an inherent contradiction in expressing individuality through mass-produced products' which Charlotte neglected to acknowledge (Maguire and Stanway, 2008: 70). Instead, she insisted that embracing multiple styles asserted her individuality rather than conforming to a specific trend, despite the fact that retailers prescribe these styles and choices (ibid.). It was also rather telling from our interview that Charlotte was an admirer of the singer Rihanna. She owned many of her albums, selected a Rihanna song to produce a music video for her coursework, and also dyed her hair a similar (and uncommon) shade of pink which matched Rihanna's current hair colour at the time. Despite all of these choices, Charlotte maintained that her choices were authentically her own: 'I don't really...look to the media exactly to be like "what kind of person should I be? What kind of clothes should I buy?" I just do whatever feels comfortable for me really'. Similar to some of Maguire and Stanway's respondents, Charlotte 'construct[ed] a personal narrative of authenticity that revolve[d] around the reflexive choice and assemblage of commodities' (ibid.: 71). In a few instances some respondents admitted to drawing from celebrity style for fashion inspiration, but often the celebrities chosen were those who were also seen as having unique and individual taste. Billie explained:

> Star-wise, I really like Alexa Chung, Olsen Twins, um Chloë Sevigny; they kind of dress for themselves. Alexa Chung even said she doesn't dress for men, like, if she wants to wear Dungarees...then she'll do that. I just kinda realise that...you can't be comfortable with men unless you're comfortable being on your own and being yourself.

Billie alluded to the notion that the external operates as an indicator of one's internal being.[69] In this specific case, 'dressing for yourself' signals that one is comfortable with themselves and also signifies one's ability to successfully have relationships with men. As Billie later pointed out, though, 'it's kind of a weird cycle that you're either dressing for guys or you're dressing for yourself in the hope that guys will like you', which highlights Billie's recognition of the complexity (and perhaps impossibility) of attempts to adorn ourselves entirely for our own benefit and satisfaction. Despite these complexities, Maguire and Stanway explain that 'the active, reflexive expression of style is essential to the construction of claims to authenticity and individuality, however riddled with inconsistencies those claims may appear from the outside' (2008: 71).

Respondents' desire for authenticity was also responsible for their hesitation to negatively judge the actions of others. Despite reciting the postfeminist mantra, 'it's their choice' when discussing women who are represented in sexualised ways, students did not necessarily always agree with or support those choices, but felt unable to judge women who choose to express themselves in a sexualised manner since they too desired freedom of expression. Patricia elaborated:

> ...people like Katie Price, you know, all the models, if that's what they want to do that's up to them. Who am I to tell them not to do something when I want to do something myself?... I mean my personal view is that I don't agree with what they do...but like I said if I wanna do things that I wanna do and be who I am, and that is genuinely who they are then you can't say 'well no you can't because you're making us look bad'.

Because Patricia had her own interests and ambitions she considered it unfair to take up a stance against sexualised representations of women especially when the choice to represent oneself as sexualised is seen as an 'authenticating act'. Defined by Arnould and Price, an authenticating act is a 'self-referential [behaviour that] actors feel reveal or produce the "true" self' (2000: 140). When Patricia referred to models

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[69] Throughout this section, I make distinctions between the internal and external aspects of students. My use of terms such as 'internal' or 'inner self' is in simple reference to the non-physical aspects of students' subjectivities – not to suggest that there is some 'individuating essence' which remains after 'the purgation of all those features making up one's everyday, public being' (Handler and Saxton, 1988: 249).

who engage in activities that reflect 'genuinely who they are' she in essence was conceiving of their actions as authenticating. Important to note here is that authenticity is conceived not as a given but rather as negotiable (Cohen, 1988: 379). In this understanding of authenticity, the self (a 'benchmark of authentic existence') is constructed through one's participation in the world (Handler and Saxton, 1988: 249). Simply put, 'the question here is not whether the individual does or does not "really" have an authentic experience...but rather what endows his[/her] experience with authenticity in his[/her] own view' (Cohen, 1988: 378). For Patricia, being able to pursue one's authenticity should be prioritised even if such pursuits have detrimental effects on a collective group (i.e. 'you can't say "no because you're making us look bad"').

Students' emphasis on the external was paralleled in the classroom where they were often expected to focus on the ways in which women were visually represented. At St Mary's, the key characteristics students learned about representations of women were related to the visual, whereas the characteristics of male representations were mostly related to behaviours or attitudes. For instance, in students' handbooks, they completed a worksheet which required them to identify male stereotypes and provide examples (see Appendix G). The stereotypes are described entirely by actions or attitudes. The 'Professional' is 'assertive and competitive'; the 'New Man' has 'non-oppressive relationships with women, children and other men'; the 'Lad' is 'dominated by male pastimes of drinking, watching football and by sex' and so on. In contrast, another worksheet focusing on representations of women has students identify 'four types of facial expressions found in the cover photos of British women's magazines' (see Appendix H). Based on Ferguson's (1990) research, the 'Super-smiler' is described as having a 'full face, wide open toothy smile' whilst the 'Chocolate Box' has a 'half or full-smile, lips together or slightly parted'. Though these facial expressions are linked to a 'projected mood', this activity reinforces the notion that women can be 'read' based on how they look – a conclusion students were not expected to draw when discussing male stereotypes.

Across all three sites, students created a horror film trailer for their practical coursework and were expected to reproduce the narrative and generic conventions in order to demonstrate their understanding of the horror genre. Though teachers found

this objective to be a useful tool for gauging students' grasp of content, it often led to coursework which reflected the common 'damsel in distress' stereotype found in many horror films. This could be seen as also reinforcing certain ideas about women as opposed to encouraging students to produce alternative representations which subvert generic conventions (and consequently allow for more pluralistic conceptions of women in horror films). Where critical media literacy is involved, Share argues that 'it is not enough to just identify sexist, racist, classist or homophobic messages or their origins; students should be encouraged to question how these oppressive ideologies are sustained and create critical alternative messages that expose and challenge the ideological structures' (2009: 28). Yet the above examples of classroom activities and coursework demonstrate how students were often expected to reproduce current representations rather than consider and create critical alternatives, which would in turn develop a non-conformist mode of thinking about gender representation. Rarely did they learn about other non-appearance related aspects of women's subjectivity which are represented by media. When/if they did, the conversation had a tendency to return to a focus on the appearance of such representations. For instance, at St Mary's, students compared and contrasted two distinct representations of women: Rachel Dawes (the female-lead character from *The Dark Knight*) and Sarah Beeny (a property developer and television presenter). Though the comparison was meant to contrast a 'damsel in distress' stereotype (Dawes) with a powerful, independent woman (Beeny), the analysis largely focused on how these women were presented to look the part, as opposed to how their actions created their identities. Subsequent discussions about these women involved textual analyses of their clothing, make-up, and bodies rather than their speech, behaviour and/or actions.[70] The following excerpt offers an example of how students were meant to analyse Sarah Beeny:

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[70] Also problematic with this lesson was that Ms Smith expected students to compare these representations without considering more sophisticated concepts such as genre and/or realism. The conclusion that Rachel Dawes (a fictional character from an action/suspense film) exhibited weak and fragile characteristics was related to her constant placement in dangerous situations within the narrative. If Sarah Beeny (a woman in a reality television programme) was also threatened by a violent criminal she probably would not display the same strength and confidence as she did whilst renovating her home.

We've just finished watching a clip from *Beeny's Restoration Nightmare*. Half the lights in the room are switched off. The students are chatting amongst themselves. Ms Smith shouts over them: 'So now I'll give you a couple minutes to write down your initial impression'. She pauses the clip on a low-angle shot of Sarah Beeny, dressed in dark trousers and construction boots, looking down at the camera. 'That would be a good image to start with because you've got her physical appearance but you've also got technical codes that *also* reveal something about the character. So I'll give you a few minutes to write down your first impression and then we'll go through it together bit...by...bit'. Students return to their notes. Ms Smith circulates the room, reading students' notes and offering suggestions: 'So write down something about her clothing as evidence for that point' she says to one of the boys. 'What kind of jacket is that, Miss?' Joseph asks. 'It's a black, leather jacket.' She returns to her desk at the front of the room. 'Her body shape, her hair, does it fulfil our expectations of women on telly?' Ms Smith replays the clip, pausing at various shots while shouting reminders to students: 'So, again, dress code might tell us something important about her character there'. The clip is paused at a shot of Beeny playing with her two small children. 'That's quite important. They've included these images for a purpose because they tell us something about her and *one* of her many roles'. 'Are those character traits?' Yasmine asks. 'She has a family, she's a mother, a housewife, yes'. Ms Smith scans through the clip and pauses at another shot of Beeny swinging a sledgehammer through a wall. 'Now there's something very interesting about this shot only if you're very observant' she says to students. 'She's smashed a wall' one of the boys suggests. 'She looks more like a guy than a girl' another boy says, causing the students to laugh. A girl in the class offers a third, inaudible guess. 'She's what?' Ms Smith asks. 'She's pregnant?' the girl repeats. 'That's right, she's pregnant. She's eight months pregnant.' A number of students react in shock: 'whoaaa'. 'But that's very important – how does that challenge our ideas about pregnant women?' Ms Smith asks the class with no response. I can hear Jonathan at a neighbouring table: 'If my wife were pregnant I wouldn't let her smash a wall'.

Though students developed skills in textual analysis, the above example demonstrates that they were simultaneously reinforcing a type of analysis which evaluated women's appearances as opposed to other aspects such as women's social traits, occupations or, as discussed later, their sexual orientation. During a brief moment the analysis did focus on Beeny's role as a mother and wife but quickly returned to a discussion of her (visibly) pregnant body.

To have students identify one of these representations as challenging expectations (Beeny) and another as reinforcing them (Dawes) fails to consider

5.2 Pluralism versus Conformity

As mentioned in the previous chapter, students tended to adopt a third-wave feminist voice which places an emphasis on self-definition and individuality. This was especially prevalent in discussions focusing on their external appearance, where key phrases such as 'standing out' and 'being an individual' were often cited as essential to their sense of style. Anne explained the significance of her distinct style and taste:

> I wouldn't want to strive for that typical look because if everyone were like that we wouldn't be individual, we wouldn't get along really because opposites attract as they say... I just feel that you get more attention if you stand out rather than do the sort of expected things to fit in.

Though Anne was specifically addressing external appearance in her comments, she made clear connections between the physical and non-physical aspects of individuals. In this case, appearance becomes representative of one's identity, where 'looking different' allows us to be compatible with one another ('opposites attract'), and also where distinguishing oneself physically from others will gain further attention than might efforts to 'fit in'. The physical becomes a gateway to understanding one's personality, an idea Anne reinforced later in the interview with comments such as: 'if you've got a personality that's out there then you strive to [look] "out there" as well. I think a quiet person just sort of fits in'.

The emphasis on being and looking individual is very much in concert with what columnist and author Virginia Postrel (2003) terms 'aesthetic pluralism' (11) which, in the current age of hyperaestheticisation, represents 'not the return of a single standard of beauty, but [instead] the increased claims of pleasure and self-expression' (10). The style choices of female students often reflected an 'aesthetic pluralism' through their focus on practices of adornment which were alternative and not always appreciated by their male counterparts. Interviewees recounted occasions where they had either worn an item of clothing or created a distinct 'look' with their make-up and were later mocked or teased by their male peers. These 'negative' responses they received did not prevent them from continuing to make playful and creative choices with their appearance. As Jennifer explained when discussing a pair

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the broader context within which these women were situated.

of trendy, loose-fitting trousers, 'I have to say when I wear those [trousers] guys are always like "what are you wearing?!" but I like them!'

Students' style choices seemed less dependent on the approval of their male colleagues but instead defined by their personal taste and, of course, by the fashion and beauty industries. It is worth noting, however, that some forms of mockery may not always be interpreted by students as negative but may in fact be part of flirtatious endeavours from heterosexual male students and a form of attention which girls enjoy receiving. Standing out in order to gain attention was cited by several girls as important when choosing outfits or creating a certain style for themselves (e.g. Anne's earlier comments). As such, it is entirely possible that some instances of teasing may have been interpreted by the girls as a sign of success in their efforts to gain attention. It was equally clear that not all forms of attention were seen as positive or desirable. This was especially emphasised when girls spoke of unwanted attention they received whilst they were out at night clubs with friends. As Anne put it,

> Some people dress like when [they] go out...they...get negative, really negative attention from that and obviously that leads to problems. In worst cases, being followed and things like that. But I believe that's like their own fault in the way they're dressed, but obviously there's some really weird people out there as well. I just think if...you can dress like that and you can sort of take the compliments that you'll get but not in a negative way then that's OK that's fine. But if you're dressed like that and you're getting that kind of negative attention, you're portraying it negatively, then that could lead to problems.

Here Anne explained the dangers of negative attention, but placed most of the onus for this type of attention on the style choices made by the recipient. This parallels earlier observations made in the preceding chapter regarding students' postfeminist sensibility and their emphasis on women's full participation in their sexual subjectification. In the above comments Anne took this approach one step further by explaining how it is the recipient herself who invites the negative attention ('you're portraying it negatively') and also interprets the attention as negative ('take the compliments...but not in a negative way'). Regulating the amount and type of attention a woman receives is therefore her responsibility and is largely based on how she presents herself physically.

In addition to seeking validation from the fashion and beauty industries, girls also sometimes craved the approval of other girls in their schools and/or friendship

groups. In several cases students explained how fashion and style played a role in 'fitting in' with their social circles. Natalie's experience most clearly demonstrates the relationship between style and social affiliations:

> I've always loved really old things like, vintage jumpsuits and that. But I never really, I always wanted to wear them – I have the clothes in my cupboard – but I didn't have the confidence to wear them because I knew if I wore them around my old friendship group they wouldn't accept me anymore. So I decided that they weren't the right friends for me. And I changed friendship groups and started doing art and started making some clothes and stuff like that. And I just went from there really.

Earlier in our interview, Natalie explained how she had suppressed her individual style and taste for several years so that she would be accepted by her friends. Only in more recent years did she gain the confidence to openly express her sense of style which she knew would result in the loss of her original friendship group. Fashion for these girls was not simply an expression of their individuality or a way to gain attention but often dictated the social circles in which they would be accepted (and conversely, those that would reject them).

Not only did students embrace individuality in their appearance, but they also indicated a desire to see more pluralistic representations of women in media, a view which perhaps stemmed from their participation in Media Studies. During interviews, students often explained how women's representation was addressed in the classroom. A prevalent method for teaching students about the limited and stereotypical representations of women was to provide key visual categories for analysis. At St Mary's, for instance, students learned about Haste's four part model of sexual stereotypes (1994) which includes the Wife, Witch, Whore, and Waif. According to Haste, representations of women can be divided into these four categories. The Wife is described as a wife and/or mother figure, whose 'sexuality is geared towards procreation' (St Mary's Handbook, 2010: 30). The Witch is seen as a threat to men. She is sexually independent, assertive and demanding (ibid.). The Waif is an innocent woman in need of protection, with an element of corruptibility. Lastly, the Whore 'appears to fulfil the male fantasy of a sexy woman' (ibid.). After learning about these stereotypes, Ms Smith's students applied each label to a number of female singers and bands from various album covers. The following field diary excerpt describes this lesson in greater detail:

Ms Smith advances to the next slide in her PowerPoint presentation:
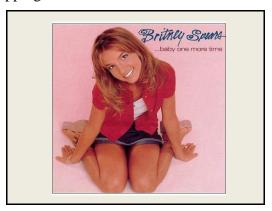
Witch, Wife, Waif or Whore?

Study the following representations.

Classify the women represented using Dr.
Helen Haste's theory.

Give reasons for your decisions.

'So you're going to study these representations and classify, name these representations and for each one – let's see, how many pieces of evidence do I want? I would like two pieces of evidence for each one and you can do this as a team, OK? So here is number one, you have two minutes to say what's the stereotype'. She advances to the first image by tapping on the interactive SMART board:

Two of the three boys in the class, Rob and Jim, are sitting at our cluster of desks in the middle of the room. When the Britney Spears album cover appears Rob, the only black male in the class, looks up and says: 'Dayum! Future wife there, put a ring on it'. Lizzie giggles. 'Alright, that's "waif", what'd you put?' Jim asks the rest of the group. 'Yeah I put "waif" too' Lizzie confirms. They move on to the next slide:

Lizzie quickly decides: 'She's a witch' but Rob disagrees. 'Whore. Look at her, she's a whore'. Jim sides with Lizzie: 'She's a witch' and Lizzie explains to Rob, 'No 'cause that's not a male fantasy. She's

going against "oh got to be skinny" she's –' Jim chimes in: 'Sexually independent'. Ms Smith can be heard reiterating instructions around the room: 'What about her facial expression? Is it a nice, invitational smile or a snarl? Why would men find her threatening, is it about her dress code? Is it about her body shape?' Rob continues discussing with Jim and Lizzie: 'She personally fulfils my fantasy but since it's three against two let's go with yours, we'll go for "witch"'.

I've noticed that Rob enjoys making flirtatious comments to indicate his interest in women. Yesterday when students were working on an individual writing assignment, he asked me several questions about myself. 'Where are you from?' he blurted out, breaking the silence. Lizzie looked up from her work, Jim hunched over his papers and continued writing. 'Uhm, that's a good question'. Truthfully, it was a question that always made me feel uncomfortable. 'Where am I from...in?' I hoped Rob would clarify. 'Canada, right?' I was both surprised and relieved that he was asking about my nationality and not my ethnicity. I realised that for some of the students here my accent was more interesting than my skin colour. 'Yeah I'm from Canada but I live in Leeds'. 'I kinda guessed that 'cause –' I interrupted him: 'I'm glad you didn't say America 'cause I would have been upset if you did.' 'Would you?' He asked. 'It's just the stereotype here isn't it that everyone with this accent is American'. 'Well I'm not a stereotype either' he said with a slight smile, leaning back in his chair. Lizzie stifled her laughter. Jim carried on working, un-fazed by the conversation. Rob continued to ask me questions about Canada, particularly about the weather. Looking at me from the corners of his eyes, with the same casual smile, he ended the discussion by saying, 'I wanna go to Canada, you can take me'. Lizzie burst out laughing, Jim shook his head as if to indicate that this was 'typical' Rob behaviour. I laughed uncomfortably while looking out for Ms Smith.

From these types of exercises, students generally come to the conclusion that representations of women are stereotypical and narrow (this conclusion is also heavily reinforced by educators in all three sites). The desire to see a greater variety of female representations was articulated by most interviewees, such as Patricia, an A2 student from Capulet Court: 'I think there are many other ways to show women...not just like a sex object, more like the working class, working hard, educated and stuff...I'd really like it if they represented every single woman of today'. Laura, another A2 student from the same site added: 'I'm kind of just saying not to show [women] like, the same way over and over again. So you would just get like, different women, different sized women, different skin colour, different hair colour'. Students possibly developed these ideas through their participation in Media Studies, where lessons often focused on the lack of alternative representations of women, and thus emphasised the necessity of more diverse portrayals.

On an intellectual level, students understood and embraced an 'aesthetic pluralism'. They articulated the importance of representations which were more inclusive and which celebrated diverse types of beauty. Even with their appearance, many students enjoyed taking risks with their style, and often seemed impervious to the mild criticisms such choices might have invited from (predominantly male) others. However, it was equally apparent that many students continued to hold onto an idealised standard of feminine beauty and attractiveness, which they ultimately preferred and strived to attain. When asked to describe the 'ideal female representation' she would like to create and see in the media, Kylie emphasised that the representation should not be 'someone who is really ugly or anything...but pretty in a natural kind of way'. These types of comments indicate the importance students continued to place on physical attractiveness and beauty. Furthermore, students were acutely aware of how the media had fostered their desire for a specific ideal, as Heather indicated in the following excerpt:

> Heather: Like, Victoria's Secret models, I wish to look like them but I don't think that it's healthy.
>
> Divya: Why [do you wish to look like them]?
>
> Heather: 'Cause they're beautiful and they're all thin, they're tanned and they're models.
>
> Divya: And after what you've learned about in Media Studies, you don't think that's maybe impacted the way you might think about those models?
>
> Heather: I think it's wrong, like, looking that thin and stuff. But they're more curvier models than actual models so they don't, well I suppose they do starve themselves a bit, but they do eat. Whereas other models just live off like one sweet a day.

Heather admitted that her dissatisfaction with her appearance was unhealthy but struggled to reconcile this knowledge with the deeply engrained definition of ideal beauty she associated with Victoria's Secret models – even if this ideal required starvation in order to attain. As Coleman notes, 'being aware of what goes into the production of bodies in media images does not in itself dispel feeling bad' (2008: 23). This was apparent in many interviews with students who often contradicted themselves by citing pluralistic media representations as necessary whilst themselves still conforming to and desiring certain beauty ideals. Other research has demonstrated how race may mediate girls' interest in striving for an 'ideal feminine physique', such as Duke's study, which argues that African-American girls are

'uninterested in...achieving the ideal feminine physique, as the [teen] magazines portray it' (2000: 382). Duke attributes this lack of interest to the 'exclusion of images of black girls and women in magazines and partly because of African-American culture' which finds fuller-bodied women more sexually attractive (in Coleman, 2008: 8). Though it is evident that representations of black women and girls are lacking in mainstream media and that there are obvious differences in definitions of ideal beauty across races and cultures, the two black students in this study (Melanie and Charlotte) thought otherwise. This is highlighted below by my conversation with Melanie.

> Melanie: I was born in Zimbabwe but I came here when I was really young but like...in Zimbabwe, before, my mum was telling me that like bigger was better. But now 'cause the Western market's kind of gone over there like, everyone still kind of tries for the slimmer look and even in loads of African countries most girls want to be slim. They don't want to be bigger.
>
> Divya: So is that a direct influence of the media?
>
> Melanie: Yeah I think it is 'cause like before they didn't used to have as many channels but now they've got American channels so like what they see on TV is kind of what it's supposed to be. So they just copy what it is on TV and stuff.
>
> Divya: What do you think of that? Is that good, is that bad?
>
> Melanie: I think, I dunno, I wouldn't necessarily try to copy how someone looks on TV [...] I kind of want to be happy with myself...
>
> Divya: And are you happy with yourself?
>
> Melanie: No I wanna lose weight.
>
> Divya: OK, why?
>
> Melanie: Everyone asks me that. I dunno, I wanna tone up.
>
> Divya: OK. And why is that, because of what you see?
>
> Melanie: Actually yeah, it's cause of what I've seen...'Cause you know when it's summer and stuff and you go to the beach and everyone's got flat bellies...can't exactly go if like you look weird.
>
> Divya: Hmm, so have you taken any steps towards actually doing that?
>
> Melanie: I would say I am but I never do [laughs].

Melanie was aware of previous cultural preferences for fuller-bodied women in Africa (and her native country of Zimbabwe more specifically), but she was extremely perceptive of how Western media channels have been instrumental in

transforming these ideals to a slimmer standard.[71] Though she was perhaps conceiving of the 'effects' of Western media in an over-simplified manner Melanie offered a contrasting view to the broader conclusions of Duke's study. Rather than identify how cultural norms could replace or challenge mainstream media's role in defining beauty ideals, Melanie acknowledged the power of mainstream/Western media in locations where it has been recently introduced to re-define ideas of beauty and attractiveness. This perspective has been echoed in many recent studies which identify correlations between increased engagement with Western media and increased rates of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in developing nations (see Becker, 2004; Eddy et. al., 2007; Makino, 2004). In the second half of this excerpt Melanie demonstrated, through her own insecurity with her body, how much she valued the 'feminine ideal of beauty and slimness' (Coleman, 2008: 8). Though she had been exposed to African culture throughout her life (via her family and her church), Melanie continued to strive for a Western body ideal and labelled her non-conforming body as 'weird'.

Melanie's final statement in the above excerpt also pointed to a lack of motivation in fulfilling certain appearance-related desires, which was evident in several interviews. As much as the girls in this study valued and desired certain beauty ideals, they often proceeded to explain the intangibility of such desires. Their awareness of how such images are produced has led to a view which sees excessive efforts to attain the ideal as futile.

> Melanie: 'Cause like in the media...it's kind of like, unrealistic for us to try and aim for that. 'Cause they've got personal trainers and the money to pay for them or they could just get surgery whereas we just have to work for it. So it's kind of like, you're not gonna be like they are so it doesn't really matter.

Though many interviewees still expressed the desire to value a certain beauty ideal it is possible that Media Studies, which often highlights how the ideal beauty is

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[71] The slim body ideal is, of course, only one of many Western standards for beauty and attractiveness that has permeated non-Western markets. Fairer skin complexion for instance has become another recent obsession in Africa and Asia and has received significant academic consideration elsewhere (see for instance Karnani, 2007).

constructed, has resulted in a greater understanding of the unattainability of such beauty and fashion images.

5.3 Self-esteem Means Feeling Good

Discussions relating to media images and young women's self-esteem are often expressed in terms of 'media effects'. A particular concern for academic scholarship is centred around proving how media images influence women's self-esteem (and in most cases, how such images reduce self-esteem). As briefly mentioned in chapter 1, this type of 'effects' research has come under an assortment of critique 'for its inability to measure "effect" in any meaningful way' (Coleman, 2008: 3). Coleman's work in studying the relations between media images and girls' bodies has brought to question the 'oppositional model of body/image [and] subject/object' which is so often applied to empirical work in this area (ibid.: 2). Through a Deleuzian perspective which emphasises 'becoming', she calls instead for research which focuses on 'how bodies are experienced *through* images and on how these experiences limit or extend the becoming of bodies' (ibid.: 3, emphasis in original).[72]

Like Coleman, I am concerned with understanding the ongoing process of self-production which takes place for the girls in this study. With this in mind, it is essential to understand how students conceive of the term 'self-esteem' rather than impose on them a pre-existing definition for discussion. Towards the end of the interviews, all students were asked the questions: 'What is self-esteem?' and 'How would you rate your self-esteem?' Respondents often used the words 'feeling good about yourself' as synonymous with having high self-esteem, which was also linked mainly to appearance and especially to one's body. Melanie made the connection explicit in her interview:

Divya: So how would you define self-esteem?

Melanie: When you feel good about yourself...you aren't really looking to be better, [or] to lose more weight.

Divya: So feeling good about yourself in relation to the way you look. Any other factors?

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[72] See chapter 1, section 1.2.7 for a more developed account of Coleman's work.

> Melanie: Um, like your confidence level but that's kind of the same as how you look. 'Cause I've noticed that bigger people, not a lot of them are confident to say what they wanna say... They're always afraid people will be looking at them and judging them. Whereas slimmer people kind of sometimes have a higher confidence level.

Here Melanie's initial response is reflective of many girls' answers: that being content with your body and weight are key to having healthy self-esteem. When asked whether there were any other factors that contribute to one's self-esteem, Melanie mentioned 'confidence' as important. However, she noted that even confidence is related to one's appearance – and one's body more specifically – insinuating that 'bigger people' lack confidence because of their size. Anne made similar connections to the body as a vehicle for improved confidence when preparing for a social evening: 'when you're going out drinking...you put your fake tan on, you wear your heels...but that's because that makes you feel better and you get that confidence from when you look in the mirror and you think "I feel better"'. In this case the mirror comes to play a visible role in shaping Anne's self-esteem – her reflection works to confirm the success of the cosmetic practices she has employed, and this eventually brings about positive feelings towards herself. When Coleman problematises the body/image dualism, she explains that 'women's bodies are often *both* subjects and objects of images and do not exist as an entity that is secure and bounded from images' (ibid., emphasis in original). The reflection produced by the mirror is an ideal example which demonstrates Coleman's point; the body becomes an object created by the mirror's reflection. This reflection can also be seen as a type of 'image' in the sense that girls use the mirror to confirm their satisfaction (and, in many cases, their dissatisfaction) with their appearance.

Maguire and Stanway frame these practices of self-production as 'a do-it-yourself project' (2008: 65). First, we recognise through self-surveillance the inadequacies and flaws of the self and the body (ibid.). Here, the mirror also becomes an essential means for surveying the self and identifying physical flaws. Then, we identify 'the appropriate tools, practices and experts to' allow for an improved transformation, thus turning the self into a DIY project (ibid.). Though students spoke about self-esteem and confidence as 'feeling good about yourself', it seems that their expectation is not to acquire self-esteem through an acceptance of their current appearance and/or physique, but to acquire confidence through DIY projects which align the self with a more acceptable standard. This was most

apparent in Anne's comments about applying fake tanning lotion and wearing high-heeled shoes to feel better and more confident.

Though it is most common to hear both in the media and in academic scholarship concerns regarding girls' low self-esteem, there are alternative concerns articulated by some of the educators in this study regarding students who too closely fulfil Western beauty ideals and, as a result, potentially have quite high self-esteem. Ms Davies in particular noted in an early e-mail correspondence that 'conventionally pretty [and] slim' girls in her classes struggled to engage critically with issues of media representation. Elaborating on these comments during our interview she added the following:

> In some ways it's almost a gift to their intellectual and emotional development if they've got some sort of disfigurement, [laughing] you know? If they're just struggling with acne or, [sighs]... It just seems too easy because they are what the media suggests is perfection. And they are! They're at the peak of their perfection, they're 16, 17, they're gorgeous and lovely in all the ways that the media would want them to be. But it's very difficult for them to then question the criteria on which they're being judged. And it's easier to start questioning if you feel lovely but when you look in the mirror you don't see the girl from Laboratoire Garnier [laughs].

Though the girls in this study continuously point out their physical flaws and the practices they rely on to improve their appearance, Ms Davies viewed many of them as physical 'perfection' and suggested that this may in fact be an impediment to their critical thinking. A lack of confidence in their appearance can prove helpful in developing a more critical view of media, and the ways in which they define beauty and attractiveness. The educators in this study might share a concern for students' lack of critical engagement, but many respondents argued otherwise:

> I don't think the...media lessons try to make you feel better about yourself, it just shows you. You can see, like, Ms Farooq doesn't show us something and say to us 'this is not how you wanna be, you lot are all beautiful'...She doesn't try and make us feel better about ourselves, *it just does it really for itself.*

Cassandra explained how Media Studies lessons have a 'natural' tendency to improve students' self-esteem through 'showing' rather than 'telling' them how representations are constructed.

For many of the girls, learning the extent to which photographs of women in media are edited or photoshopped was key to improving their self-image. In Ms

Davies' classes students discussed photoshopped images (and photographs generally) at length:

> This morning I'm with a very large group of about twenty-five students. All of the boys sit together in the front of the room and about fifteen girls sit behind them. Kylie is the only exception. She later told me in our interview that her only friend in the class is one of the boys which is why she always sits next to him in the front, away from the rest of the girls. 'On the magazine covers you looked at yesterday you encountered iconic signifiers – things that looked like the person they were representing' Ms Davies says. 'In a really straightforward answer, Rose, what were the iconic signifiers on the magazines you saw?' There is a long pause.

> 'Iconic signifiers look like the thing they're representing' Ms Davies tries to clarify. 'Is it the women?' Rose asks. 'Yes. The women were represented by what? What was there to represent them?' There is another long silence. 'There were *women* on the magazines?!' She asks, feigning shock. 'Were they pinned in?! Were they Christ-like and nailed in?!' Another pause. 'Photos, that's the word you're looking for. There were coloured photos of the women on the magazines. It's so easy to say there are women on the magazine. *No* they're *not* women on the magazine they're *photos* of women. Why am I making such a crazy distinction, why should that matter?' More silence.

> 'The photos of me up in this room are so very clearly different from me that people often have to ask: "is that a photograph of you?"' She's right. On my first visit to this classroom I had noticed the walls plastered with photographs of women. Some were magazine shots from fashion spreads. Many were portraits of women from various cultures and time periods: geishas, Indian classical dancers and African women with tribal face paint. A life-size, cut out of Nicole Kidman and Julianne Moore from the film *The Hours* is stapled to one end of the wall. An entire section with black and white and sepia photographs of Ms Davies is closest to where I sit in the back of the room. Some of them were taken when she was a young woman with her long, blonde hair. If they weren't placed next to more recent photos of her wearing glasses and a short, cropped hairstyle I wouldn't have recognised her.

> 'And yet we think, we are so naturalised to think the photograph is the thing that we go "Judy's on the cover of a magazine". No she's not. There's a photo of Judy on the cover of a magazine. If there are pictures of me up in this room and people have to ask if that's me what does that suggest?' Kylie replies: 'They might have been edited?' 'OK they might have been edited'. Another student suggests 'They could be you at a different age.' 'Yep there's always a time gap between the photograph and its publication. Even if it's a matter of days there's a delay'.

> There is another long pause with which Ms Davies always seems comfortable. She continues: 'A photograph is constructed, you can't get away from it, can you? If I sent you out with a camera and told you

to take pictures of women you'd have to make all kinds of decisions about where you stood, how you stood, whether you're going to lie down and take the photo. If you're the model are you going to keep your clothes on? Are you going to go behind the school and make it look all grungy by the bins? Are you going to put your fingers down your throat and make it look like you're going to puke? How are you going to pose somebody? That makes a difference. So what we're saying then is photographs are constructed, they're not natural. They're just as constructed as writing sentences to describe someone.' Another pause.

'Anyone want to argue with me? We're all in agreement? Sort of?' Several heads nod. 'Good idea to write that down then: "Photographs are constructed"'. The sound of twenty-five students un-zipping their bags, opening their notebooks and flipping through pages fills the room. 'Write about the choices that are made when models are photographed. You could write ten times: "Photographs are not reality, photographs are not reality, photographs are not reality"'.

In this excerpt, Ms Davies makes a clear distinction between images of women and 'real' women through the use of semiotic principles such as 'iconic signifiers'. The distinction between women as 'real' and images of women as 'representation' has been problematised by a number of feminist writers. Pollock (1987) for instance argues that the unsustainable separation of women and images leads to a view of representations as reflections that are either good or bad dependent on their level of realism (where, for example, good images are realist photographs and bad images are edited magazine pictures and advertisements). Coleman points out that such a dichotomy 'relies upon a separation of subjects and objects; women are subjects which are distinct to and in antagonism with images which are objects' (2009: 9). The problem with this type of thinking for feminists such as Pollock and Coleman is that such a distinction is dependent upon 'a masculine notion of the subject as secure and stable and able to forge, or not, relations with others' (ibid.). Focusing instead on the relations between women's bodies and images can lead to the dissolution of the masculine 'gap between body/image subject/object' (ibid.: 10). The question this body of work poses for us (and importantly for those involved in the development of Media Studies specifications) is to consider how media educators might shift the focus in their lessons from the separation of reality and representation to an emphasis on the relations between people and images.

In our interview, Kylie discussed at length how learning about the excessive editing of photographs prevented her from judging and comparing herself to such

images. She also recalled learning about the representation of women in magazines before A-levels, but noted that educators at that time did not 'really talk about how [images are] constructed [or] how a photo is airbrushed'. This is a crucial requirement for Kylie because, as she explained:

> ...if you saw how a photo was airbushed, and you saw how it was before, and you recognised it as: 'oh that's just a normal photo' [then] you kind of see how it's made *a lot better*. I think that would probably help if you saw that, before all the airbrushing, it was just a normal person.

Understanding that all media messages are constructed is a core concept of many media literacy models (Share, 2009). As Share notes, 'exposing the choices involved in the construction process is an important starting point for critical inquiry because it disrupts the myth that media can be neutral conveyers of information' (2009: 19). What is striking about Kylie's comments is that despite her understanding of the construction of such images she maintained that the result of these manipulations is a person who looks 'better'. She was aware that a photoshopped image is falsified and hence less realistic but yet would still identify that image as superior to the unedited version. This seems rather contradictory to earlier comments from girls who felt that authenticity was most important in their self-production and in their selection of good role models. Why, on one hand, would students value authenticity and yet, on the other hand, continue to rank edited media images of women as superior to un-edited, authentic images? For these girls, there is an apparent tension between valuing both authentic and constructed representations. There is some evidence to suggest that this is a sentiment shared by girls specifically. As Ms Davies explained in her interview the male students were quick to offer their thoughts on photographs:

> Just because a model is presented as attractive and airbrushed, the lads might not fancy her. If you get a lad in the room who is confident around his own sexual taste, um, who says quite strongly 'yeah but I wouldn't touch her with mine' [laughs] you know, it can do more convincing than anything I can say! And lads are often the first to say 'yeah but she's wearing too much make-up' or 'her mouth is too shiny'.

Ms Davies' comments suggest that girls hold certain definitions of feminine beauty and attractiveness which are distinct from (and sometimes opposed to) the ideals and preferences held by their male counterparts. It is worth noting that although the girls in this study quite clearly articulated an interest in drawing on alternative sources of

inspiration for their make-up, dress sense and style, Ms Davies' impression of the girls is that they would be more easily convinced to adjust their values and tastes in order to be aligned with the preference and 'sexual taste' of boys. The implication then is that girls' self-esteem is either bound up in efforts to appear as close as possible to the physical ideal found in media or in efforts to satisfy their male peers' standards for female attractiveness. This, of course, denies a range of subject positions which girls and boys may inhabit. Most evidently absent from both students' and teachers' remarks are considerations of queer identities, which I explore in the following section.

5.4 Locating Queerness

What should be accounted for in the excerpts throughout this chapter are the heteronormative assumptions which were embedded in both students' and educators' remarks. The following section offers an additional dimension to earlier discussions about how gender representation content could be improved by including a more diverse range of representations for analysis. In this particular case, I consider how the inclusion of queer representations would work to challenge more common heterosexual assumptions in media (and by extension in the classroom). Ms Davies spoke in a manner which positioned all the 'lads' in her classroom as heterosexual. This type of assumption was also present in students' comments. During interviews, none of the participants identified themselves as homosexual but several made reference to their heterosexuality through comments about their 'boyfriends' or their romantic/sexual interest in men. Though students were not specifically asked during interviews about their sexual orientation, it was evident that many continued to rely on a heteronormative framework in their discussions around sexuality and physical attraction (which were always in relation to the opposite sex). Only in one interview with an educator, Mr Brody, was homosexuality raised as a potential mediating factor:

> ...the lasses who stand out, who still lean forward and are engaged and interested are already sold on [the classroom content which challenges mainstream representations of women]. I suspect that comes from parental and socialisation or maybe sexual orientation. Um, I have no idea whether you know, how many of the girls I teach are lesbian but some will be. Sometimes you get clues from clothing, and so on... Again, I can't say specifically, but I do have a sense that girls who

have that are more likely to be rejecting the particular sort of, mainstream ideas and - but as I say that's purely anecdotal...

Here Mr Brody raised the possibility that female students who identify as homosexual are more likely to reject ideals promoted by the media. He also made reference to relying on students' external appearance (clothing) to identify their sexual orientation. This type of evaluation is demonstrative of how external appearance is often used as an indicator of not only girls' personality but, in this particular case, their sexual preference(s). Though it is true that people's clothing can reflect their social affiliations, however unconsciously, the above example still highlights the superficiality that girls are often encouraged to adopt – in this particular case the notion that their clothing can provide others with 'clues' to their sexual orientation. Lessons observed in all three sites also failed to address representations of homosexuals or any alternative to the heterosexual male/female dichotomy. This was confirmed in early lessons where students discussed gendered stereotypes of men and women without any consideration for how queer representations might problematise or complicate such stereotypes. Male students would make reference to those who identified as queer, but these remarks were often made in a humorous manner and educators did not address the comments or include them as part of a more serious discussion. This was most evident at Capulet Court, where two male students briefly discussed transsexual/transgendered groups during class time.

> Students are sorting through their lists of male and female characteristics and attempting to identify which traits are learned and which are biological. Ms Farooq has students create two separate lists on the whiteboard at the front of the room. Lewis looks up at the two lists. 'What about people in the middle?' he asks. There is a moment of silence. 'You don't get in the middle people, in the middle people are weird' Neil says. One of the girls laughs. Ms Farooq says: 'Nice. Thank you very much for that, Neil.' 'No problem' he replies. They continue with the lesson.

Neil and Lewis were most likely referring to transsexual and/or transgender people with the term 'in the middle' (as in, in the middle of male and female) which they identified as unnatural and 'weird'. It was made clear later in their conversation that these boys were aware of some 'trans' terminology (though perhaps unable to correctly distinguish each term) when Neil said, 'I think transvestites are completely learned – I don't think there's anything natural about that'. Neil's classification of

'trans' identities as learned was reflected in Natalie's interview comments regarding homosexuals:

> ...some people say 'I've always been gay my whole life' but...I think that if...if like the whole idea of being gay wasn't out there, wasn't expressed in the media, if there wasn't famous gay people and lesbians, people wouldn't know what was going on with them and they wouldn't say 'oh yeah I like men'. But it's because like the whole gay pride situation, the thing on Google Chrome, where 'it gets better' with Lady Gaga and people saying 'it's OK to be gay' like, less people would be gay. I don't have anything against them but...I don't think it's natural. I don't think that you can be born to say, 'oh no I don't like women. I like men'. I don't think like, it might not just be the media, it could be something that you grow up like, you have a best friend and you fall in love with them or something like that, it could happen like that but it's a lot of the media I think.

In the above excerpt, Natalie attributes power to the media for normalising homosexuality but also expresses what some would consider to be deeply homophobic views. It was mentioned earlier that none of the girls whom I interviewed described themselves as homosexual. It is highly understandable why those who perhaps are gay would be unwilling to discuss it openly, especially when some of their peers hold views such as those cited above and when there is an absence of classroom discussions or analysis of queer representations in media.[73] Mr Brody posited that lesbian students are more receptive to classroom content which challenges certain mainstream media representations of women; however, he neglected to acknowledge the many challenges gay students themselves face on a daily basis. Gay teenagers have a greater likelihood of suffering from depression and of committing suicide than do heterosexual teenagers and this inevitably relates to their self-esteem.[74]

At Capulet Court, Ms Farooq was not observed engaging students in any conversations about queer stereotypes (seen in the above example with Neil and

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[73] At St Mary's, the analysis of the 'metrosexual man' was the closest an observed lesson came to including the study of alternative representations and yet this lesson continued to frame a possibly homosexual/bisexual representation of masculinity as a 'metropolitan-heterosexual' (i.e. 'metrosexual').

[74] See for instance Eisenberg and Resnick, 2006; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2009; Ryan et al., 2010).

Lewis); though, she mentioned during our interview that these discussions do take place:

> It's great when we look - we're just doing Goffman and it's great to get out all the stereotypes. They say 'oh that person looks queer or that person looks like a slag'[75] and you question them, you ask 'where does that language come from?' Or, 'why have you got that certain opinion? What does that mean? Where [has it] come from?' And they start to break it down and they start to see 'actually, do I really mean that? Or am I saying that because the idea of, of...saying someone's queer, makes me feel better about myself?' You know? There's lots of internal issues with the kids as well and their own prejudices that are coming out.

Ms Farooq's comments highlight the lack of consistency between lessons and consequently the difficulty in providing a complete account of what takes place in the Media Studies classroom. In other words, although I did not observe lessons across any of the three sites which included an analysis of gay representations or stereotypes, it is possible (based on Ms Farooq's remarks) that these conversations did sometimes take place in my absence. However, even if these conversations occur, it seems that queerness is reaffirmed as a negative and undesirable identity; to say someone looks 'queer' is as offensive and derogatory as calling someone a 'slag'.[76] Ms Farooq's line of questioning does perhaps encourage students to think deeply about why they resort to name-calling, for instance, but at the same time also confirms that calling a person who looks or is 'queer' is insulting. What might be more helpful is to highlight how terms such as 'queer' have been reclaimed by gay communities, demonstrating to students why the term 'queer' should not be used as a pejorative in the first place.

Natalie's remarks which targeted media as main sources of 'naturalising' homosexuality would suggest that this is a worthy issue for address in the classroom and in the curriculum more broadly speaking. If the overarching thesis of the gender representation lessons is for students to understand and challenge the binary

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[75] A 'slag' is a pejorative British slang used to describe an individual (usually a woman) with loose sexual morals or one who is sexually promiscuous.

[76] Though even terms such as 'slag' have more recently become reappropriated especially by young women. The SlutWalk movement which began in April, 2011 is a more recent example of women's efforts to redeem derogatory terms such as 'slut'.

oppositions which media rely on to create limited representations of men and women, one would expect that students would learn about gendered identities which exist beyond these binaries and yet this was absent from the syllabus. As is the case with reinforcing girls' focus on the external by emphasising the analysis of women's appearance in the media, it is possible that lessons which emphasise the analysis of binary oppositions also reinforce thinking about gender in binary ways as opposed to demonstrating more pluralistic and inclusive conceptions of gender.

Conclusion

The Media Studies classroom at A-level provides opportunities for girls to reflect on representations in a critical manner, which sometimes assist in improving students' self-image. Students acknowledged that representations of women are mostly narrow and derived from stereotypes. There is also a considerable desire for media to portray a much wider range of representations – both in terms of physical appearance and social demographics but, in some instances, 'natural beauty' persists as an important and necessary element even for students' most idyllic representations. There would also seem to be an over-reliance on the study of the body and the external appearance of women in media, which is reflected in the values of interviewees' self-presentation. Rather than select role models based on factors other than their appearance, students tend to evaluate celebrities primarily based on external features. Despite this selective evaluation girls do recognise the importance of 'being oneself' and, at least with regards to their physical appearance, make efforts to express and celebrate their individuality. Perhaps if students were to learn about and conduct analyses of representations which dealt with non-external factors of women in media, they would be more willing to express their individual ideas as well. Self-esteem was often defined by students in relation to 'feeling good' about their external appearance which, in order to achieve, requires the implementation of certain DIY projects in moderation. Whilst it is clear that Media Studies does bring about a shift in students' conceptions of their appearance, there are obvious limitations and areas for development – especially in the inclusion of content which addresses queer stereotypes and alternative forms of gender in culture.

Chapter 6
Being Critical: Making Criticality Available in Media Education

Introduction

At the heart of this project is a belief that critical engagement with media education can enable young people to understand better how the media function. There are, however, certain obstacles located beyond the classroom or the subject that work to impede levels of critical engagement. How we teach gender representation within Media Studies is necessarily linked to the ongoing reputation of the subject as lacking a comparative rigour with other subjects. Media Studies continues to be reputed as a 'soft subject' even by learners and teachers involved with media education. Some within the academy are also questioning whether media education, and critical thinking more specifically, can truly thrive in the school system or whether 'certain forms of criticality and engagement [are] better suited to social spaces and exchanges *outside* the classroom' (Rennie, 2012, emphasis in original). The recommendations I have provided for improving the teaching of gender representation also become exposed to such questioning if Media Studies itself is not valued as a subject. This chapter, then, is about justifying the presence of Media Studies, and by extension the teaching of gender representation, in the school curriculum. I argue that the development of critical thinking is not, as Rennie (2012) might suggest, an impossibility in the school system but is in fact the starting point for highlighting what Media Studies can provide and offer to students and teachers in a context different from other subjects.

The following sections return to the question of what it means to have critical media literacy and apply the question to the case of teaching and learning about gender and gender representation in the media. I begin with an exploration of teachers' definitions of critical thinking in order to understand how critical skills are conceived of and fostered in the Media Studies classroom. Teachers often associate theory with the development of critical awareness and use it to support lessons but, in some cases, theory is considered as truth and little is done to evaluate the validity and accuracy of such theoretical work when applied to more contemporary

representations of gender. I demonstrate through remarks from teachers and students how the value of Media Studies remains in doubt and how neoliberal discourses have set up Media Studies to fail within the school system. As a result, the possible solutions I have previously suggested in other chapters for improving critical development (such as a greater inclusion of feminist perspectives and the reduced emphasis on teaching to the test) cannot simply come from transformations within the subject but are also reliant on broader societal transformations taking place. I conclude with several suggestions for methods of teaching about gender representation that will improve students' critical awareness, namely, by incorporating gender with other aspects of representation (such as race, age, class, etc.) and by allowing students greater independence and control of their learning, thus acknowledging the diversity and individuality of their abilities.

6.1 What is Critical Thinking?

The more academic definitions of critical thinking have already been addressed in chapter 1 and provide a clear and succinct conception of what it means to have and/or develop critical skills from a scholarly perspective. However, little has been said about the ways in which educators conceive of critical education and how they make efforts to engage with a critical pedagogy in their teaching. For this reason the following section attempts to expand on how educators discuss critical skills in relation to Media Studies and how they attempt to develop these skills through the use of theory.

Teachers consistently defined critical awareness as dealing with the notion of challenging students in some shape or form. As Ms Farooq explained,

> What I define as critical thinking skills is that I will bring something to class that may, and I hope, challenge them. And I want them all to be able to voice an opinion. By the end of the subject, I want them to have understood what it means to have a stereotype so when they watch the news, for example, they aren't just mindlessly taking in information. They need to think about what institution created that? What [motivation] was behind that? Where is the money coming [from]? Who does that effect? For me, that is what…critical thinking skills are: to allow our students to basically become better democratic citizens.

A six-year independent review of 14-19 education funded by the Nuffield Foundation was published in June, 2009 (Pring et al., 2009a). In this report, the purpose of education is outlined in a way that parallels Ms Farooq's definition of

critical thinking. The report identifies the main purpose of education as a moral one: young people are 'in need not only of intellectual development, but also of a wider sense of fulfilment, self-esteem and hope' (Pring et al., 2009b: 6). Though Ms Farooq provided quite a clear definition of critical thinking, it does appear to be at odds with the previous observations regarding the pressure which teachers face to teach to the test. On one hand, teachers attempt to instil critical thinking skills and allow students the independence to 'voice an opinion' as Ms Farooq put it (though more than simply voice an opinion students should be learning how to substantiate an argument). Yet on the other hand, teachers also feel pressure to ensure students perform well on exams which is usually accomplished by narrowing the selection of 'correct' answers they believe the exam board will accept and reward. When I asked Ms Farooq whether students' critical autonomy is compromised by the exam format she acknowledged that the subject does not allow for the extent of critical thinking to which it claims but that removing the exam altogether 'would just be making it more of a Mickey Mouse subject'. The fear of reinforcing the reputation of Media Studies as a 'soft subject' underpinned many of the pedagogical choices teachers made (for instance, as I shall discuss below, the uncritical use of theory teachers often encouraged students to incorporate in their work).

Ms Smith also discussed critical thinking as 'challenging' students but made specific reference to how critical thinking is developed within representation lessons:

> Critical thinking is bringing students up against ambiguity, where they have to actually discuss the meaning of something... I think that is a vital part of Media Studies and studying representation; it's bringing them face to face with contradictions both in their own thinking and within texts themselves... So it's about gently getting them to question their own values, their own beliefs, their own responses whilst at the same time remembering that what we're learning about media is how people respond differently to media texts.

Again, there is a contradiction present in trying to celebrate the polysemy of texts and individuality of audiences whilst at the same time expecting students to provide analyses which conform to the educator's understanding of exam board requirements.

In terms of teaching about gender representation specifically, the educators noted how theory comes to play a major role in allowing students to think critically.

Mulvey's male gaze theory is especially prevalent in gender representation lessons and students often reference the male gaze to explain certain sexualised representations of women. At Spring Garden, I observed Mr Brody advising his students that they '*must* use Laura Mulvey if they choose to discuss gender representation in their essays'. His colleague, Ms Davies, was more apprehensive about Mulvey's work. She remarked, 'I think [the male gaze] is often taught without teaching where it came from or what [Mulvey] was writing in response to…and then it kind of makes very little sense'. Ms Davies exact concern was observed in lessons at St Mary's as the field notes demonstrate.

> In today's lesson, Ms Smith is teaching her class about the male gaze. She defines it to her students simply as the 'male perspective' without any greater detail. Ms Smith uses the example of women's magazines in order to further reinforce how women are categorized 'from a male perspective to flatter the male ego'. A group of female students sitting at a cluster of desks next to me share with Ms Smith and the rest of the class their impression of women's magazines: 'But Miss, aren't the magazines meant to be for women to, like, look at and enjoy instead of being part of the male gaze?' Charlotte asks. Ms Smith corrects her, explaining that the magazines are actually 'offering [them] a template, a way of looking that appeals to men'. Rather than apply a more critical approach to Mulvey's work she uses it in this lesson to reinforce certain (narrow) ways of thinking about women's representation. The girls produce an exclamation of 'ahhhhs' in unison, an indication that they have now understood the 'true' intention of women's magazines.

Despite Ms Smith's earlier remarks about critical thinking and wanting students to understand 'how people respond differently to media texts' she adopted an approach in this example which positions all women's magazines as attempting to offer their readership a singular template. There was an opportunity in this lesson to consider how women's magazines produce a much more complex and contradictory set of representations of women and how audiences respond to these representations in equally complex ways. Rather than attempt to appropriate a theory developed in the 1970s to current representations, Ms Smith might have engaged students in a discussion around how Mulvey's work may no longer apply to contemporary media, and more specifically film, in such a straightforward manner. These discussions would have encouraged students to think in more critical ways about theory and gender representation. Ms Smith's simplified explanation also demonstrates that she has not been taught, as a teacher, about how to manage students' values.

Alternatively in Ms Farooq's class she taught students about the male gaze with a clearer context. She asked students for possible critiques of Mulvey's work, highlighting how female and homosexual audiences were excluded from these theoretical accounts and used examples from film to demonstrate how both the male and female gaze are utilised in contemporary cinema. Often this was achieved through having students identify the technical codes such as camera angles, lighting, and editing which elicit certain responses from the audience. During interviews, students reflected on their critical awareness by referring to the technical codes they identify when engaging with various media outside of the classroom, demonstrating how classroom content can permeate their personal engagement with media.

Though the pressure to ensure that students provide exam-appropriate analysis can be seen as limiting the development of critical thought it does have certain benefits to students and should not be entirely dismissed as invaluable to their learning. Regardless of whether or not the arguments used are a true reflection of their beliefs and analysis or simply those of the teacher, students are taught the importance of providing sufficient evidence to support those arguments and how to develop a properly-structured response. These are skills that, as Ms Farooq said, will 'aid them brilliantly' if they go on to pursue higher education. The intention of critiquing teachers' methods is not meant to imply that the current structure of lessons is of no value to students but rather to demonstrate how lessons can be updated to encourage the development of independent critical analysis. This will also brilliantly aid students at university and, more importantly, in their day-to-day interactions with media.

6.2 Why Teach Media Studies?

In order to understand the current state of media education in England and Wales it is essential that we identify some of the broader shifts currently taking place in the education system, including the impact of neoliberal discourses on education which began in the 1980s and has resulted in public sector institutions operating like those in the private sector (Whitty, 2000). The neoliberal globalisation thesis asserts that 'nation-states must liberalise all areas of welfare organising in the interests of global capitalism' (Beckmann and Cooper, 2004: 2). As a consequence, services such as education have been increasingly subjected to 'market liberalism' leading to

educational policy which focuses on economic functions and marginalises 'broader social and political objectives' (ibid.: 4). As Tony Blair noted in a 2005 speech, 'education is now the centre of economic policymaking for the future', reinforcing the idea that schooling should be improved 'to serve the requirements of the economy' (in Mansell, 2009).

The 1988 Education Reform Act encouraged the move towards a 'centralised school curriculum' and has since resulted in a performance culture in schools and a reduction of teachers' professional autonomy (Beckmann, Cooper and Hill, 2009: 313). Examples of these reforms can be seen in the implementation of:

> compulsory and nationally monitored externally set assessments for pupils/students and trainee teachers; publication of performance league tables; a policy emphasis on "naming and shaming"; the closing or privatizing of "failing" schools and local education authorities (school districts); and merit pay and performance-related pay systems for teachers, usually dependent on student performance in tests. (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998 in Beckmann, Cooper and Hill, 2009: 313)

In the past, local authorities were required to set performance targets for schools, resulting in a more standardised set of achievements for students to attain. However, based on the Schools White Paper released in November 2010, the Department for Education announced that 'the centrally-driven statutory process of target-setting will...end, with the 2012 targets being the last that schools are required to set' (DfE, 2011). The Department for Education claims that ending statutory targets will allow 'schools the freedom to set their own priorities and be in control of their own improvement', a decision which teaching unions would strongly support (ibid.). However, there is also a risk that bypassing local authority control will result in less desirable outcomes such as greater levels of competition between schools for high ability students. In other words, if schools are able to set their own targets, those with the most resources and best quality teachers, such as Capulet Court, will inevitably raise performance targets and excel in the league tables compared to the more 'struggling' schools with fewer resources and those often located in economically deprived areas. As a result, parents who have the means to send their children to a more successful school outside their local area will do so whilst those with fewer options will continue to attend schools with lower targets resulting in what Hill has previously described as an 'increasingly differentiated provision of services' (2006: 9). A recent OECD report noted that the

UK education system is already among the most socially segregated in the world (2012).[77]

There has been ongoing debate as to whether the ending of statutory targets is an example from the White Paper of decentralisation or centralisation. Since the control will be direct from the Department for Education rather than channelled through local authorities, some would argue that this shift represents further centralisation. However, the recent expansion of academy schools in the last two years most clearly demonstrates the coalition government's interest in moving towards a supposedly decentralised education system, where all schools in England have been offered the opportunity to become academies and where many schools deemed as 'failing' have either been converted into or replaced by an academy. Forcibly converting schools into academies is an obvious contradiction to the Department for Education's interest in granting schools 'the freedom to control their own improvement' (DfE, 2011). As of June 2012 there were 1877 academies in England – more than double that of the previous year (DfE, 2012b: 12). Though funded directly by the government (as opposed to the local authority), academies are also required to be sponsored in part by businesses, church groups and/or charitable trusts and operate as independent schools with the freedom to control the curriculum, school hours and teachers' pay (among other things). Some, such as Wrigley, have argued that the sponsors of academies have 'almost absolute power' and can even determine 'which young people to include or exclude' from enrolment (2009: 47). For this reason academies are not considered public-sector entities but are instead viewed as 'publicly-funded private bodies' (Lewis et al., 2009: 108). For instance, academies are permitted to hire teaching staff who are experts in their field but do not possess qualified teaching status (QTS) which can be viewed as contradicting the White Paper's emphasis on raising the standards of teacher quality in schools.[78]

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[77] For example, 'immigrant students are more than twice as likely to be in disadvantaged schools than non-immigrant students' (OECD, 2012: 1).

[78] More recently there have been fears that Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, will privatize academies and free schools next year, de-coupling them entirely from Whitehall control (Merrick, 2013).

The point here is not to debate whether a centralised or decentralised system would work best in improving the current state of education in England. Rather, the point is to highlight how these reforms, under the guise of 'liberating schools', have the potential to increase competition between schools, further class divisions among students and (most relevant to this research) reduce the emphasis on the development of critical knowledge and thinking. What Buckingham describes as the marketization of education is a result of such neoliberal reforms, transforming the school into a business, education into a commodity and the learner into a client. These changes have '[led] to the increasing production of uncritical thinkers...where people are treated as mere "human capital" prepared for "jobs" and where there are increasingly fewer spaces for providing/allowing for the provision of broad-based learning and critical awareness' (Lewis et al., 2009: 106).

The Nuffield report – the largest review of 14-19 education in England and Wales since 1959 – has also raised serious concerns about the corporate ideology driving British education, holding the 'performance management agenda' responsible for a failed school system which has replaced a 'language of education' with a 'language of performance and management' (Pring et al., 2009b). As Beckmann, Cooper and Hill note, the development of 'skills' rather than 'education' has also become of primary importance in the curriculum (2009: 314). Even critical thinking is now commonly referred to as a 'skill' in current educational language (and consequently in this research). In chapter 3, I briefly considered how media educators might be affected by such performance agendas to teach to the test. However, as a subject that not only values critical thinking but cites it as a primary learning objective, in what ways might Media Studies be immune to the effects of neoliberalism and in what ways might neoliberal discourses continue to frame pedagogical practices within A-level media education?

The current performance culture of the education system has led to the devaluation of subjects which do not fulfil 'short-term economic objectives' or '[serve] the interests of commerce' (Beckmann, Cooper and Hill, 2009: 314; 338). Media Studies has often been victim to a 'discourse of derision' which has attempted to undermine the value of formal media education (Fraser, 2013). Through a ridicule and misrepresentation of its content, Media Studies has failed to achieve the prestige and 'credibility' of other, more 'traditional' arts and social science subjects. Such

discrimination can be found even from those directly involved in the subject. During interviews several students and teachers made mention of the 'soft subject' reputation which Media Studies has acquired and how it has affected their career choices. For students, the concern is related to how universities and future employers will view applicants with media qualifications. Even students such as Kylie, who wish to pursue a career in the media, are hesitant to continue their media education at the post-secondary level. Here she explains why:

> Kylie: Having my dad as a kind of role [model] in the media [has] kinda made me realise that to do media in the future as a job you probably shouldn't do Media Studies.
>
> Divya: Ok [laughs].
>
> Kylie: Well you can do Media Studies in school but not really in university so I'm kinda doing English and stuff.
>
> Divya: Why do you think the two don't go together?
>
> Kylie: I think they do I think it's just that it's um, it's seen as a soft subject for employers but, really, probably teaches you what you need to know. But my dad thinks that the, the main thing that you need to know to get into the media and be successful is to, how to kind of portray a story, and you kinda learn those skills more through English and more kinda, hard subjects, I think.
>
> Divya: So um, are you, I mean have you applied to English programmes already?
>
> Kylie: I've applied to English but I've decided to go down a slightly different route, which is um, American Studies, and I'm doing – it's really good because it's a combination of literature and history and it's got some film and media and culture and politics in it as well, so it's, it's really good.

It should be noted that Kylie does in fact acknowledge that Media Studies provides students with the necessary skills and knowledge they require for a career in the media.[79] Her concerns are mostly based on how the subject is perceived by potential employers; her father's experience and advice also seems to weigh heavily on her decision-making. Oddly enough Kylie has decided to pursue a degree in American Studies, justifying its value due to the interdisciplinary nature of the subject which in many ways parallels the interdisciplinary nature of Media Studies. Though Media

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[79] Kylie's comments are also related to another shift in higher education discourse around the employability of media and communications graduates specifically.

Studies has faced far more demonization in the British media than American Studies, it is unlikely that the latter would be reputed as any more of a 'hard subject' than Media Studies, making Kylie's choice seem all the more curious.[80]

Kylie's teacher Ms Davies offered some contextualisation for the soft subject reputation of Media Studies during our interview and provided her recommendations for 'reclaiming' media education:

> I think we went through a golden period perhaps five to ten years ago where, if people wanted to be in the media, they did Media Studies because, you know, they could see themselves on the BBC in front of war-torn wherever. They got the idea where you did a vocational thing and it led to a career in the media. I think now people have wised up and they've understood that, you know, a career in the media is more likely to come to you if you do English at Oxford and daddy works at the BBC… I think there's a kind of cynicism that's set in and almost a kind of backlash that 'oh doing media is no good because it doesn't even lead to a job in the media' and I think we need to reclaim it as 'it was never meant to lead to a job in media. It was meant to educate you about reading the media and understanding the media and getting the most out of the media' you know?... I think really the way to go is to present it as something that's more akin to history that equips you with thinking skills and a breadth of texts and experiences that you can then apply in other areas in real life.

Here Ms Davies called for a complete separation of Media Studies from vocational pursuits in the media industries. For her, the idea that media education can lead to a career in the media seems to be an irrelevant one. Similarly, Ms Farooq disassociated media education from media occupations, noting that she often struggled to provide appropriate guidance for her students wishing to attain a career in the media.

> The kids who want to go and do it and be in the industry, should I tell them don't go and do a degree? But if I tell them that what if they decide later: 'actually I want to do something else' and they should have done a degree?… It's bizarre. I don't think there's any subject other than Media Studies that, unless you're going to teach it, what do you use it for?

The contradictions here are apparent; rarely do we find the same expectations/concerns for those graduating from philosophy or English courses.

[80] One possible explanation may be related to the opportunity to study at a North American university during her second year which she noted in the interview as quite an appealing aspect of the course.

Ms Farooq was far more pessimistic about the role of Media Studies, most likely because of her own past experiences. She explained how after completing an undergraduate degree in film studies and a Master's degree in mass communications she was unable to find suitable employment opportunities. The absence of alternatives was what led her to complete a PGCE, noting that she 'loved [her] degrees but couldn't do anything with them'. This probably explains why she felt such conflict in offering guidance to her students wishing to continue media education at the university level – because she has experienced firsthand the difficulties of obtaining relevant employment. Her final question – which essentially asks 'what is the purpose of Media Studies?' – verifies her own doubts about the value of the subject and its role in students' education. Conversely, Ms Smith strongly believed in the long-term benefits of Media Studies and the opportunities it affords students interested in media careers. As she explained,

> We have a huge focus in our department on careers. We get outside speakers in…we had this film maker come in and speak and we've got notice boards on career progression and we've got hand-outs. We do ever such a lot in terms of where the subject can take you and try to sort of educate them really on um, coming away from the stereotypical view of the media. So for example they either want to be a journalist or a director and those are about the limit of their understanding of the potential for careers in the media. So part of what we do is sort of broadening their experience to encourage them to think about the wide array of opportunities that are available in the media.

Ms Smith was the only teacher in this study who never expressed any doubts about the link between media education and a career in media. Instead she cited an example of her former student who went on to become an award-winning independent film director as evidence that other Media Studies students could pursue similar career paths. Her excessive optimism made it difficult to ascertain whether Ms Smith, as a department head, was supplying a standardised response during our interview or whether she felt genuinely optimistic about students' ability to progress in the media industries.

Among these three teachers alone there was quite a spectrum of opinions on what Media Studies can do or should do for students. Ms Davies called for a Media Studies which is devoid of any training or guidance for employment in the media, Ms Smith believed in educating students on the array of employment options that are available to them via Media Studies and Ms Farooq seemed uncertain of whether the

subject even has a purpose in today's curriculum. Each of these conceptions of media education (or in Ms Farooq's case a lack of conception) leads to three very different outcomes for how gender representation is addressed within the subject. Take for instance Ms Davies' proposed reforms. If Media Studies is no longer seen as an educational path to attaining a career in the media and its entire purpose is to ensure students 'become better democratic citizens', then enhancing students' critical thinking and exposing them to, as Ms Davies put it, 'a breadth of texts and experiences' would become a priority. Presumably in this scenario gender representation lessons would therefore include more critical (and hopefully feminist) work and a broader range of issues and texts. In the two other scenarios, the outcomes for gender representation are less desirable. If Media Studies is seen as necessarily linked to future employment in the media, as Ms Smith supposedly conceived of the subject, then the focus on gender representation would most likely be reduced as it would be seen as having little value in contributing to students' employable skills. Lastly, in the most radical outcome, if more teachers begin to question the purpose of media education in the manner that Ms Farooq had, then perhaps the subject would be eliminated altogether from the curriculum. These scenarios confirm that, until we have a consensus of what we imagine the pedagogical goal(s) of media education to be, it will be a nearly impossible task to decide on the content to include in the Media Studies curriculum and consequently the depth to which topics such as gender and gender representation are addressed by the subject.

Unfortunately, attempting to identify the pedagogical goals of media education has become a difficult task precisely because neoliberal discourses have impeded pedagogical practices in media education. It is very tempting to view critical media literacy as a form of inoculation against 'bad' media messages. 'The ongoing neoliberalisation of education...implies that since we can't "fix" the media at this point, the best we can do is arm students with the skills of personal choice and responsibility' (Rennie, 2012).[81] Yet this type of emphasis on the individual learner

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[81] Though Rennie is writing in the context of Canadian media education (which has a rather different history compared to the UK and even the US) his analysis of how the neoliberalisation of education has led to an excessively structured

further perpetuates 'the idea that massive institutions of power are essentially untouchable' (ibid.). An additional concern requiring further address is how efforts to gain legitimacy through formal recognition in the school system have led to a reduced emphasis on students' critical autonomy – the very thing which media education claims to develop. In other words, by making over Media Studies to fit with the structural demands of education, we inevitably minimize the emphasis on critical thinking in favour of more standardised and testable learning outcomes. As Rennie observes, 'while the political affiliations of many engaged with media literacy appear progressive, the foundational institutional structures of formal education remain remarkably inhospitable to certain kinds of social practice' (ibid.). As a result, these forms of constraint automatically set up media education to fail in providing students with all of the learning outcomes it promises 'because the performance management agenda reduces the school experience to narrow performance outcomes...rather than the means by which these are achieved' (Beckmann, Cooper and Hill, 2009: 315). The Nuffield Review came to similar conclusions:

> [The current assessment regime] encourages 'teaching to the test', thereby impoverishing the quality of learning. There is a failure to utilise the full range of assessment tools that recognise different dimensions of learning. Moreover, the same assessments are used for distinct purposes: finding out what has been learnt, selecting for different progression routes and providers, and accounting for the performance of the school, college or system. These all require different assessment tools. (Pring et al., 2009: 8)

Despite exam board specifications highlighting 'critical autonomy' as a learning objective for A-level Media Studies, we have seen examples throughout this document demonstrating how educators often stop short of critically analysing and evaluating texts and instead focus on preparing students for their exam.

Rennie questions the ability for media education, and critical thinking in particular, to ever succeed within the confines of the classroom. He asks, 'is it time [for media education] to find a new home?' (2012). Though there are apparent obstacles and concerns which need to be resolved, I would argue that doing away with media education in the school system will in fact only further serve the aims of

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version of formal media education is certainly applicable to current shifts in England and Wales.

neoliberal reforms by eliminating a subject which is seen as having apparently little economic value. There are no straightforward solutions to countering neoliberal discourses in media education; however, eliminating the subject from the curriculum altogether (as Rennie suggests) seems equally ineffective.

Whilst this section has attempted to identify how neoliberalisation in education occurs at higher levels of policy, it is important to point out that these reforms do not always translate directly into the local level of the classroom. Classes observed at Capulet Court and Spring Garden often encouraged a great deal of critical reflection and debate as seen throughout previous chapters. Many preceding examples of lessons which required further improvements came from my observations at St Mary's. Coincidentally, this also happened to be an institution where the teacher and department head, Ms Smith, believed strongly in the progression from Media Studies to a career in media. The Nuffield Review also indicates that colleges which comprise the FE sector (like St Mary's) rarely receive 'equitable funding' in comparison to other types of educational institutions (Pring et al., 2009b: 7). Perhaps this is part of the reason why lessons at St Mary's lacked the critical rigour present at other institutions: teachers there were more focused on helping students develop skills which could eventually lead to a career in media and they lacked the funding to pay for additional teacher training and/or equipment which could have enriched students' critical development. It is also worth noting that many of the reforms to the English and Welsh education system are still underway at this time making it difficult to assess exactly how these reforms will eventually affect A-level Media Studies in particular.[82]

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[82] For instance, by 2015 A-levels will be assessed by a standalone final examination after two years of courses as opposed to the current system of exams after each year of study. It remains to be seen how schools, educators and students will adapt to this change. Furthermore, though most of the issues identified in this chapter pertain to both England and Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government has responded to current challenges in 14-19 education in 'somewhat different ways' as described by the Nuffield Review (Pring et al., 2009b: 5). Given that none of the institutions involved in this project are located in Wales, I have not provided further details about the specific differences between these two countries but a more detailed summary of these differences is provided in Pring et al., (2009a).

6.3 Improving Critical Thinking

Other chapters have outlined specific ways to improve on teaching gender representation in A-level Media Studies. However, there are certain broader, conceptual modifications that could be made to allow for the development of students' critical thinking skills. Three main opportunities for strengthening critical development can be found by adopting a more holistic approach when teaching the representation unit, by teachers allowing students greater independence and by schools taking a greater interest in students' learning experience.

As mentioned in chapter 2, gender representation is often taught in isolation from other representational issues such as race, class, nationality and so on. Although this format was ideal for the purposes of classroom observations it is likely that such distinctions encourage students to think about each lens as separate from the others, resulting in a limited awareness of the relationality and intersectionality of representation and gender more specifically. Ms Smith also recalled, during our interview, guidance from the WJEC exam board which outlined similar recommendations:

> ...another interesting um piece of advice given by the board is not to start our teaching of representation with gender. Because um, because it's a way of...avoiding going on to more difficult areas of representation which are the more abstract areas of representation. For example...we've got to cover representation of issues, representation of nation, um, age, um, and um ethnicity. And the argument was that if we start off with gender, students then become um, immersed in that and reluctant then to look at representation in any other way other than gender. So - which actually challenges the way that I teach because I always start off with gender because I think it's the most accessible. But what it does then is it sets representation as being something that is purely about gender, and there is some resistance when it comes to teaching representation as more than that. So...what we try to do [now] is use texts where we can explore at least two of the characteristics, of two different representations.

Not only does the exam board suggest avoiding teaching students about gender representation first but they also go on to advise that students need to have an initial understanding of what representation means prior to exploring the many aspects of representation.

> The other thing...[the exam board] wants the students to have [is] an understanding of what representation is before they go on to look at examples of representation. So they want us to focus on the mediation process, um, and how representations construct uh a view of reality

and so on... So that's going to change the way we teach it, in terms of looking at texts. I think what we will do is look at other representations first but I think we will bring gender into that. So for example we are going to look at um, war representations. We've got um the soldier magazine which is a great example of that. You can't talk about that without looking at ideas of masculinity contained in the pages so I think what will happen in reality is that gender will somehow permeate the others...and it can kind of work like a puzzle in that respect.

Interestingly, this approach to teaching gender relates to the same principles that feminist scholars have long been calling for in academic research which is to consider the many racial, ethnic, and socio-economic identities that shape our experiences in addition to our gender. Perhaps unbeknownst to Ms Smith and the WJEC board they are in many ways applying a critical feminist approach to updated teaching methods by examining gender in relation to other aspects of representation. This holistic approach was more present in Ms Davies' lessons and the main reason why fewer observations took place at Spring Garden; it was difficult for Ms Davies to always guarantee when gender would feature in a representation lesson. For a single media text, students were encouraged to apply a broad range of issues in their analysis. In Ms Farooq's classes she asked students to define representation first in simple terms which she reiterated as 'how reality is portrayed through the media'. She then asked students to list the 'five factors of representation' which are: class, race, gender, age and nationality. Though helpful for students to classify representations initially as either one of five factors it also limits discussions and analyses and excludes aspects which permeate or overlap with these five. As with Ms Smith, it would be beneficial for Ms Farooq to consider broadening conceptions of representation especially since the AQA exam board conceives of representation in more pluralistic ways.[83]

It was also the case that students became more analytical and critical thinkers when they were allowed to work independently and take ownership of their learning. Ms Smith reflected on how her efforts to control students' progression in many ways limited their development:

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[83] In the AQA specification for A-level Media Studies several possible topics are suggested for teaching about representation such as 'alternative representations', 'political issues surrounding representations' and 'the effect of globalisation on representations in the media' (2010: 3).

Ms Smith: What we've found in the past is we've over-taught stuff. We haven't allowed them to think for themselves so we're taking a more holistic approach now with texts. So [the students] have a media guidebook and we might focus on one skill but they're free to read ahead. And the difference has been remarkable because they're reading ahead, and their level of analysis has been much higher so I think I'm learning...to let go and let them experience media texts for themselves.

Divya: So could you give me an example in the booklets that you allow them to read ahead?

Ms Smith: Yeah in the front there's a content page and it runs through media language, camera, colour, editing, sound, lighting, genre, narrative and whilst we'll focus on one thing and I'll say 'you've definitely got to talk about this but you can use anything'. And they really are [laughs]! They're carrying right ahead in the booklet and they're incorporating it correctly into their analysis and it just goes to show – that told me you know, that I have been over-teaching the subject and I've also been restricting especially the top end students by only looking at a skills approach rather than a holistic approach: 'here's a text and read from that text what you can'.

What Ms Smith identified as a 'skills approach' is demonstrative of the new managerialism of education – a consequence of neoliberalism – which moulds students 'into uncritical but "skilled" and "docile" bodies' (Beckmann, Cooper and Hill, 2009: 330). New manageralism is described as 'the [implementation] of private sector techniques to public sector management in the name of economy, efficiency and effectiveness' (Beckmann and Cooper, 2004: 6). Managerial reforms which emphasise performance lead to students who possess a range of 'skills' but are unable or unwilling to articulate 'oppositional ideas' from those presented by their teacher (Beckmann, Cooper and Hill, 2009: 330). In other words, new managerialism in education is ultimately concerned with the production of docile bodies (Cooper, 2002). Since Ms Smith explained that she had abandoned the skills approach she previously used in the lessons I had observed it may be that her students are now developing stronger critical skills through independent research. Ms Smith also raised an important point when she referred to 'top end' students which is that not every student can be expected to gain the same level of critical awareness. Some students simply excel at a different pace or to a different degree than other students and efforts should be made to accommodate learners of diverse abilities. As Ms Smith noted, allowing students the opportunity to learn independently provides high-ability students the chance to excel further. Ms Davies was also acutely aware of students' diverse abilities:

Divya: Do you encourage [students] with the theory to be critical of it?

Ms Davies: I think to be absolutely honest that depends upon the students. There are some students that you're just relieved they've opened the books, started to understand theory and can apply it. You're making a judgement really about their abilities, at that stage of 'that's probably as far as you can go'. But again with the A*,[84] A, B students then yeah definitely.

Taking individual learner needs into account relates to the final suggestion for improving students' level of critical engagement. In Hammer and Kellner's (2001) work, they suggest that 'teachers *and students*...need to develop new pedagogies and modes of learning' (emphasis my own). At the beginning of every student interview, I asked respondents whether they were happy with the content they covered in Media Studies and if there was anything they wished to change about the content. Almost every student had initially said they were quite happy with the content and had little to no suggestions for improvement. However, it was only through the process of discussing and deconstructing their lessons during the interview that students would then offer possible reforms to the syllabus or identify limitations in what they had learned. The interview itself provided students with a rare opportunity to reflect on what they had been learning and how it could be improved. It was evident that, for many of them, prior to the interview they had not deeply thought about what they were learning and whether it was benefitting them. Though student evaluations of modules and courses are common in universities they are not a requirement at A-levels. Collaboration between teachers and students occurs minimally in sixth form and yet should be more of a necessity. As Anne explained,

I think [module reviews] would help. 'Cause obviously you have teacher reviews where they review you and your work but I think if you could make some points across as well in the way it's being taught that would help as well. People put their views across, it makes you feel better when you sort of put your point across and you've had your say and they understand. Just so you feel sort of more involved with it and you are kind of in control of your learning.

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[84] A* or 'A star', introduced since the summer 2010 A-level certification in England, is a grade which refers to students who achieve 90% or higher overall in their A2 units.

More than developing critical awareness of content alone students should often be encouraged to reflect critically on their learning. An active interest in 'how young people engage with the learning process' should not only come from the academy or monitoring bodies such as Ofsted but should exist within the educational institutions themselves (Beckmann, Cooper and Hill, 2009: 315). This is not meant to suggest that students should have full control over the development or delivery of content. Careful attention should be paid to ensure that such efforts do not result in a further neoliberalisation of the school, as has happened with the universities, where students become customers and consume education as a commodity. As Furedi notes, this turns the student into a 'client' and the teacher into a 'service provider' which 'inexorably erodes the relationship of trust between teacher and student' (2009: 33). Rather the aim should be to promote 'the more dialogical and non-authoritarian relations between teachers and students' via collaboration and greater reflection (Kahn and Kellner, 2007: 442). These are the kinds of recommendations which Beckmann and Cooper identify as 'the seeds of [a] counter discourse' to that of neoliberalism:

> [in] the context of educational institutions themselves, generating critically reflective and engaged human beings requires a clear and explicit fostering of open dialogues and exchanges between staff and students - a more communicative and democratic framework for the development of different ideas and practices of teaching, learning and research. (2004: 19)

Concrete examples of this kind of collaborative learning can be found in what is referred to as 'informal education' which '[enables] young people to pursue their own well-being autonomously' (ibid.). This is a non-directive approach to education which involves 'negotiation between facilitator and learners in order to reach agreement about specific topics of interest, which may include offering young people the opportunity to organise events for themselves or encouraging them to critically engage with the wider political system' (Smith, 2001 in Beckmann and Cooper, 2004: 19).

Though there are limits to the extent of collaboration that could ever be achieved in formal education, the pedagogical approaches in informal education might be a starting point for considering how greater dialogue and reflective practice could be incorporated into the existing structure of the school. It is important to note that this should not be considered an endorsement for any and all types of activities

that claim to improve student participation. As Bragg explains, through the analysis of a particular student participation project in several UK schools, efforts to improve student voice can often 'be read as an example of neoliberal governmentality' (2007: 355). In other words, through encouraging students to 'take charge of their own learning', these initiatives also require that students 'take responsibility for [their] failure to learn' (ibid.: 356). Her analysis reveals that the kind of student voice fostered through these programmes is often middle-class and leads to the marginalisation and exclusion of other voices (ibid.).[85] What Bragg's work makes clear is that measures to improve student participation in schools, though successful in some ways, require careful consideration and monitoring to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities among students.

Whilst it is true that a neoliberal discourse has impeded pedagogical practices within the English and Welsh education system it should be noted that the recommendations I have offered do not call for a curriculum that fails to prepare students for the labour market or one that completely dismisses the need for students to develop employable skills through their schooling. As Brighouse notes, 'in modern industrial societies people need to be able to integrate themselves to a certain degree in the existing economy in order to flourish' (2006: 28). Paid employment allows us not only to afford basic necessities but provides us with a sense of self-reliance, purpose and autonomy. The school should be an integral component in equipping students with basic skills which will allow them to flourish in their chosen professions and consequently to flourish as human beings but there is a difference between attending to the needs of children who will eventually have to deal with the economy and attending to the needs of the economy itself (ibid.).

Conclusion

Though the preceding chapter has focused mostly on exploring current shifts in the English and Welsh education system and media education these are essential for understanding the broader context within which gender representation is situated, and how these educational hierarchies affect one another. As highlighted by the

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[85] For example, students who did not wish to participate were 'marginalised as deviant or risky subjects' by their peers (ibid.: 354).

Nuffield report, there are a number of growing concerns regarding the failing state of education in England and Wales. A neoliberal agenda is seen as the major culprit responsible for replacing 'education' with 'performance' and 'teaching' with 'management'. This inevitably impacts on the teaching of subjects like Media Studies, which are now (or very shortly will be) pressured to yield to neoliberal reforms. As Rennie (2012) contends, under such reforms, the development of critical analysis is either reduced or identified as simply a way for youth to protect themselves from the all-powerful and dangerous media. This ultimately results in gender representation lessons that lack analytical depth or emphasise the wrong forms of criticality, thus turning critical thinking into a kind of testable subject.

Although teachers can define and explain critical thinking they are not always able to implement effectively lessons which will encourage the development of students' critical autonomy. The ineffective implementation of these lessons is not entirely the fault of neoliberal reforms in education, such as pressures to improve students' performance on exams, but is also a by-product of efforts to legitimise media education within the school system based on fears of the subject gaining and perpetuating a 'soft' reputation. The educators in this study either had conflicting views of what they imagined the project of media education to be or questioned the relevance of Media Studies as a subject. Again, the potential development of gender representation is dependent on the articulation of learning objectives for the subject as a whole, where placing greater emphasis on critical autonomy would lead to further interest in gender representation lessons that are critically sound.

The solutions to these broader concerns are unfortunately not available within this particular project. Some solutions have been offered elsewhere[86] whilst others require further study, analysis and collaboration with government bodies, schools, parents, educators, students, the academy and so forth. Hopefully, what has been made clear in this final chapter is that modifications are necessary not only at the level of gender representation lessons or even at the level of media education modules but also (and perhaps most importantly) at the level of the education system

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[86] Beckmann and Cooper have offered some helpful recommendations for 'rethinking the purpose of education' which include the adoption of reflexivity, 'practices of resistance', and a 'dialogical approach to learning' (2004: 15; 16; 19).

in England and Wales. I have attempted to provide recommendations for improving the teaching of gender representation and the acquisition of critical thinking skills within A-level Media Studies which are achievable at the classroom level. However, much greater shifts and transformations within the English and Welsh education system and within educational policy documents are paramount to bringing about lasting changes in (re)defining the role of media education in schools.

What some may find lacking in this chapter (and in the rest of the thesis) is a sustained discussion around class and privilege. Social class has often been a central issue in discussions of education, particularly in England and Wales. Class was and still is a determining factor in the type of educational institutions a child attends and the quality of education they receive. Certainly class differences between the girls and schools in this project are important to consider but have been sidelined for a number of reasons. Firstly, as a Canadian researcher with limited experience in the UK, my ability to accurately identify the social class to which British individuals belong is problematic. The cues which most Britons would use to identify each other's social class (such as accent, diction, use of slang etc.) are not as obvious to a foreign researcher such as myself. In the case of the girls involved in this study, two thirds are from the North of England and the remainder are from the South. These students often employ a range of diverse slang and particular regional accents that are not necessarily reflective of their class background but rather reflect their social affiliations. For example, social groups who enjoy listening to urban music such as rap and hip hop often embody a particular style – both in their appearance and speech sometimes referred to as 'street' or 'ghetto'. Simply because students wish to represent themselves as 'street' does not automatically imply they come from working class backgrounds. Second, the cultural geography of the three schools involved in this project is equally problematic in helping to identify students' social class. As one teacher, Ms Davies, explained about Spring Garden, the comprehensive school participating in this study:

> To some extent even with a comprehensive school, there are cliques of class distinction going on um, which you try, I mean, you have school uniforms and you've got the sets. You try various ways to get in the way of it but ultimately if you're travelling on one bus home you're likely to be friends with one set of people and if you're walking home you're going to be mates with the kids that live on the estate. And I think this school and maybe other comprehensives too suffer from a

> sort of um, sub-class of chavs who are defining themselves as a bit anti, a bit 'other than'.

My lack of cultural knowledge combined with the efforts of schools to conceal students' class differences when students are on school grounds makes the task of accurately identifying the girls' socio-economic backgrounds incredibly challenging. Faced with the decision to either draw my own (potentially flawed) conclusions regarding individual students' social class or accept that class would remain a limited variable within this project, I chose the latter. My decision is not meant to suggest that social class plays no role in shaping students' experiences in Media Studies. In fact, I am certain of the opposite but am unfortunately without the means to explore this relationship in a meaningful and precise manner at this time.

Here I would like to return to some of the earlier questions I have asked throughout this document about girls, Media Studies and experiences of femininity in order to offer further contextualisation of how the goals of this chapter are of particular importance for the future of young women like those involved in this study. I began this research with the intention of evaluating the development of female students' critical thinking in relation to gender representation lessons in A-level Media Studies. Many areas for improvement have been outlined in greater detail and for the most part they have the potential to be implemented by teachers with little complication. However, what seems to be of greater concern is the impediments in the wider structure that constrain and prevent this subject from fulfilling its potential in the classroom. What this calls for is a rethinking of how we approach Media Studies within the context of the education system. This is relevant to the young women in these courses not simply because they make up a majority of the enrolment but because of the potential for media education to provide these girls with a space to discuss and critique the many representations of women and men which they encounter on a daily basis. This type of critical development is not about equipping girls with 'critical skills' to protect them from over-sexualised representations of women, for example, which is what other reports and documents have set out to achieve through greater regulation of media content.[87] Rather, the

emphasis should be placed on cultivating girls' emergent critical autonomy through formal media education.

Finally, I would like to conclude by reflecting explicitly on the ramifications of this thesis for media educators, policy-makers and scholars engaged with media education and feminist media studies. Despite my focus on the classroom experiences of the girls involved in this research, it is apparent that the educators I observed and spoke to have come to play a central role in this work. I am certain that media educators are highly aware of the many challenges they face and the possible solutions, some of which are identified by this research. With that said, there have been a number of excerpts from lessons about gender representation throughout this project that shed light on certain opportunities for development. For instance, teachers might consider how discussions and analyses of gender representations are themselves inherently gendered through the ways in which they deconstruct women's physical bodies and men's actions and personalities (as I addressed in chapter 5). It is at this level of classroom management and lesson planning that I hope educators will find some inspiration and encouragement to reflect on their own teaching practice.

It is no easy matter, as described in chapter 3, for teachers to strike a perfect balance between ensuring students' successful performance on exams whilst also exposing them to a breadth of texts and equipping them with critical competencies. The added threat to schools if their students are deemed as 'underperforming' is another pressure on educators to 'teach to the test' thus reducing the potential to address a wider range of discussion and coursework around topics such as feminism or queer representations (as recommended in chapter 4). The greater inclusion of media production work in the classroom is not a novel recommendation but has been echoed by many proponents of media education particularly in the UK. These are the issues from the thesis that I would highlight as most relevant to readers working at the level of policy and curriculum development especially since they cannot be resolved by teachers working within certain institutional constraints. There needs to be further reflection and debate regarding the role of the exam in A-level subjects like Media Studies. As the focus of this project is not specifically on the exam format I do not possess the data to say with certainty that the Media Studies exam should be eliminated. What I have demonstrated is that the teachers involved in this

research are not entirely certain of what examiners are looking for when they assess students' work and of what counts as 'critical thinking' from the perspective of an examiner. To resolve this disconnect I would suggest a continued commitment to understanding how we might re-frame the delivery of criticality in media education in a manner that is clear and accessible to teachers, students and examiners. Part of that commitment involves discussing the relevance of the current exam format in accurately assessing students' critical media literacy.[88]

This study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions of media education among scholars by demonstrating the merit of focused inquiry at the 'micro' level of media education curricula. Some may contend that understanding how gender representation is taught in formal media education does little to advance or address the broader challenges faced by media education. I would argue quite contrary to this perspective that it is through a detailed analysis of specific elements within the curriculum that we can effectuate improvements that are tailored to the objectives of each key concept such as representation, industry, audience, narrative and so on. The results of such an approach will certainly be of value to educators teaching other subjects as well who plan to incorporate media within their curricula.[89] For feminist scholars, particularly those calling for greater attention to gender and its relationship to media in the school, my discussion in chapter 4 regarding how feminism is addressed in the Media Studies classroom offers an especially helpful starting point in understanding how students learn about and encounter feminism through the efforts of media educators. Most important, of course, has been my sustained focus on the experiences of the young women involved in this research, the ways in which they negotiate their femininity and the role of studying gender representation throughout this complex process of negotiation. If we are to improve efforts to

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[88] Among their many significant recommendations, the Nuffield Review has outlined how greater institutional collaboration should be considered in future policy and curriculum development (Pring et al., 2009a; 2009b).

[89] For example, in September 2013 secondary schools in Ontario, Canada will be introducing an official course in gender studies which includes a focus on gender representation in media (Goldberg, 2013).

develop girls' critical media literacy then we must understand and value their feminine experiences.

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Appendix A
Solicitation and Follow-Up E-mail

Subject: Media Studies Meeting

Hello [Student Name],

I'm not sure if you remember me, but my name is Divya and I was observing a few of your Media Studies classes at [institution's name] last term. You signed a consent form for the research that I'm doing, which also included possibly speaking to a few students in more detail, privately. You brought up some really interesting ideas in the classes I've observed, which I would like to ask you more about. The questions would mainly be centred around your experience with Media Studies, especially what you think about the way media represents men and women. It would be a really casual chat, under an hour and, of course, everything we talk about would in no way be linked to your name or identity (in other words it would be anonymous) and I will not be revealing anything you say to your teachers or your school.

I know how busy you must be with school and other activities, so I'm quite flexible in terms of meeting and we can meet anywhere that is convenient for you - at school or elsewhere if you have a preference. As a small way to say thanks for your help, you will receive a 7 pound voucher to use at Vue Cinemas.

Let me know if you're interested. You can e-mail me at this address or ring me if it's easier. Hope to hear from you!

Best,
Divya
[contact information]

Subject: Media Studies Meeting (Reminder)

Hi [Student Name],

I just wanted to follow-up with you about your availability for meeting with me. As I said in my previous e-mail, it doesn't have to be immediately but it would be helpful to know if you are interested in meeting and if you have an idea of when would be the best time for you. Again, I would only need to speak with you for about an hour, and you will receive a 7 pound Vue cinema voucher.

If you are not at all interested or you don't think you have the time to meet, then that is perfectly fine as well just let me or [teacher name] know. If you have any questions please feel free to get in touch.

Best,
Divya
[contact information]

Appendix B
Samples of School and Student Consent Forms

Participant Consent Form (School)

Title of Research Project: Feminine Experience: Media Education and Gender Representation

Name of Researcher: Divya Maharajh

Initial the box if you agree with the statement to the left.

1   I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated: 13/10/2010 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

2   I understand that participation is voluntary and that the college and/or media department is free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. The lead researcher can be e-mailed at csdm@leeds.ac.uk to express any concerns or to withdraw. In urgent situations, she may be phoned using the following number: 07502 163823.

3   I understand that student responses and observations made during class times will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to anonymised responses. I understand that the name of this college and the names of students and staff will not be linked with the research materials, and will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

4   I agree for the data collected to be used in future research.

5   I understand that parts of the research conducted (interviews and selected class times) will be recorded.

6

   I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the principal investigator should my contact details change.

_____   _____   _____
Name of college representative   Date   Signature

Divya Maharajh   _____   _____
Lead researcher   Date   Signature
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Participant Consent Form (Student)

Title of Research Project: Feminine Experience: Media Education and Gender Representation

Name of Researcher: Divya Maharajh

Initial the box if you agree with the statement to the left

1   I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated: 13/10/2010 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

2   I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. The lead researcher can be e-mailed at csdm@leeds.ac.uk to express any concerns or to withdraw. In urgent situations, she may be phoned using the following number: 07502 163823.

3   I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

4   I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research

5   I agree to have my interview recorded (only initial if being interviewed).

6   I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the principal investigator should my contact details change.

_____   _____   _____
Name of participant   Date   Signature

Divya Maharajh   _____   _____
 Lead researcher   Date   Signature
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Appendix C
Sample of Student Interview Questions

1. I'd like to start off by asking what inspired you to take media studies at A-level? What were you hoping to gain from this class?

2. In what ways has it met your expectations/challenged them/been a disappointment?

3. Do you remember how your teacher had introduced the unit on Representation of Gender?

4. What do you think the role of media should be? Should it reflect reality or inspire people?

5. What have you learned in this class about the way women are represented by the media? (What surprised you, and what seemed a bit obvious to you already?)

6. I remember when we were analysing the Kerrang magazine, you had made some comments about not blaming the editor for choosing to focus on male bands and using the images that she did, because she was a businesswoman rather than a feminist activist. But at the same time, you sounded a bit frustrated or disappointed that there wasn't any focus on the 'good' all girl rock bands. Do you want to explain a bit more your feelings on this issue? If you were the editor of the magazine, would you do anything differently?

7. I noticed at AS, students learn about representation in terms of positive and negative. Is that the case when you get to upper sixth?

8. Can you think of times in media studies where you or your classmates had different views on a topic, and Ms. says 'that's fine, but this is what you have to say in the exam' or 'this is what the examiners want to hear'? (Does it happen often?)

9. What do you think of the writing exercises that you do in each class?

10. What kind of role do you think the exam board plays in your learning about the media? (Are you happy with what you're learning? Do you think they or your teacher have too much control over the kind of things you learn about? What would you change if you could?).

11. How much independence or freedom would you say you have to express your thoughts in the exam or in class?

12. I haven't heard much about your production work within the class. Could you tell me a bit about what your practical assignments involve?

13. How have the knowledge and skills you've gained in this class

14. changed the way you engage with media? What about when you're with friends or your family? Have there been times where things you've learned come up at home or when you're out with friends from outside the class?

15. In what ways have you become more critical of the way that the media represents gender?

16. I noticed that a lot of the theory and exercises you did in the class around women's representation had to do with sexual stereotypes and narrow definitions of beauty and attractiveness. There was Mulvey's 'The Male Gaze' and Helen Haste's 'Wife, Witch, Waif, Whore' and Ferguson's work on the four different facial expressions on magazine covers. Are these theories accurate ways to describe women's representation or can you think of representations that they might fail to consider?

17. How do you think representations of women in media have played a role in the way you represent yourself? (What representations do you identify with? In what ways do you try to match media representations, and in what ways do you try to be different from them?)

18. Is looking good the same thing as looking sexy? (For instance if you were reading a woman's magazine, would the pictures of 'good looking' women also be considered sexy women?)

19. What kind of 'look' do you try to achieve when you're choosing and outfit or doing your hair or make-up? What matters to you about those choices?

20. I'm sure you're aware of how much attention is given to this issue that young women are being negatively affected by media whether it's related to extremely thin fashion models or the value that is placed on looking and acting 'sexy'. What do you make of these types of concerns? Are they justified – do you ever feel too much pressure to have a certain appearance because of what you see in the media?

21. What does self-esteem mean to you?

22. What about feminism? What do you think it means to be a feminist?

23. Who do you think would be a good female role model and a bad female role model for girls your age? Why?

24. You have learned quite a lot of material about the media and representation of gender. Would you say it has helped you in any way (maybe to feel better about yourself or to reduce the pressure to look/act a certain way)?

25. Do you think representations of women should be different? In what ways?

26. Is there anything else you would like to mention or add or clarify before we end?

Appendix D
Sample of Teacher Interview Questions

1. How did you end up teaching media studies in sixth form? (How long have you been teaching, do you have training in media studies or did you come to it from English).

2. What exam board are you registered with? Why did the department choose _____exam board?

3. Just to confirm from our first interview, you had said that at AS you had about _____ students, with _____ in each class, so about __ groups? And at A2 you had ___ students, in classes of __, so about __ – is that correct?

4. I wanted to talk to you a bit about your experience with the exam board. How would you describe the way content is created for lessons, in relation to the expectations that the exam board sets in specifications?

5. Would you say the exam board and in particular, the specifications, are constraining or that they provide a helpful structure for your teaching?

6. Is there any subject-specific content that you would like to include in your lesson plans but that there aren't enough time/resources for? (Can you give me some examples? What about specifically within the gender representation section of the course – do you feel that the content is lacking in any way?).

7. I've noticed that many of the specifications and other educational reports produced by the government and the exam boards, seem to emphasise the importance of developing critical media literacy or critical thinking. This can be quite a broad term though. How would you define critical thinking skills – and to what extent do you think students in your classes are developing these critical skills? (Would you say critical skills are more easily developed through production/coursework, or more through theoretical/essay writing?)

8. Some of the students I've spoken to at the various institutions involved in this study have expressed their hesitation to provide real opinions or analysis on exams, because they believe it would result in a lower grade in comparison to offering analysis that was done by the teacher, in the class. In other cases they felt that disagreeing with certain theories would also cost them marks on the exam. Would you say that, regardless of the opinions they might have, students are still developing critical thinking skills?

9. There must be a fair amount of pressure on schools (as there is on universities) to ensure that students are being equipped with 'tangible' skills that will prepare them for the workforce and improve their employability. How do you think those kinds of pressures impact on the way a subject like media studies is taught (and how do they impact on the value of less tangible skills like critical thinking?)?

10. When you get to a key concept in the module like gender representation, do you find yourself needing to justify to students the relevance of learning about gender or feminist theory, for instance?

11. Many of the students I spoke to seem to struggle when I ask them what feminism is, or what a feminist is. Is that something that doesn't get covered in the class (and if it isn't, do you think it should be?)? They also are willing to agree with the principles that feminists stand for (of wanting equality in terms of pay or housework) but they would not be willing to call themselves feminists despite having these views.

12. Most students seem to understand quite well *how* women and men are portrayed the way they are by the media, in the sense that they can deconstruct an image or identify the various codes and conventions used in representations. But they seem to struggle to find an answer when I ask them '*why* are men and women represented in these ways?'. Why do you think that is? (Because it's not a focus of the course or is there another reason?).

13. Do demographics of students play a role in your teaching or curriculum development? (Could you provide a couple of examples?).

14. Have you ever felt that your race or social background has caused certain discussions to arise with your students that wouldn't have otherwise come up? Or perhaps, in more subtle ways, have you ever felt that your race/age/ethnicity/gender/social class has played a role in your teaching?

Appendix E
Photograph of Blake Lively from *Vogue*

(Style Frizz, 2010)

Appendix F
Edited Riot Grrrl Reading

IRL POWER. Girl Power encompasses a host of cultural phenomena for young women. The use of the term is usually traced to the early 1990s, when a group of mainly white and middle-class young women gathered in Washington, D.C., and Olympia, Washington. Largely identifying themselves as gay, these young women called themselves Riot Grrrls.

Like members of the American civil rights movement who used "Black Power" as a motto to re-articulate pride in being African American, Riot Grrrls used "Girl Power" as a strategy to reclaim the word "girl." They used it strategically, to distance themselves from the adult patriarchal worlds of propriety, class expectations, and hierarchy (Hesford 1999, p. 45). With their roots in punk music and the motto "Grrrls need guitars," Riot Grrrls celebrated Girl Power for its aggressive potential to change girl culture. Girl Power became the idea that drove self-expression through fashion, new attitudes toward femininity, and a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to cultural production.

Girl Power as a Political Statement. Bands such as Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy exemplified the qualities of Girl Power by mixing a girlish aesthetic with some of the more threatening aspects of adult females: self-assertiveness, bitterness, and political insight. Many Grrrls used their bodies to convey this ironic merging of style with political expression: like punk girls, they juxtaposed feminine and masculine style by shaving their heads and wearing bright lipstick, or wearing the frilly dresses of 1950s homemakers with military boots (Klein 1997). They also made a conscious attempt to reclaim their bodies by writing politically loaded words such as "rape," "shame," and "slut" on their arms and stomachs (Japenga 1995, p. 30). Grrrls used the body itself as a performance text by taking the violent language used against them and instilling it with new meanings.

By most accounts, the early Girl Power movement was a response to the sexism, elitism, and violence of local male-dominated punk scenes, in which girls were considered less than full members. The Girl Power of the Riot Grrrls encouraged young women to see themselves not as passive consumers of culture but as producers and creators of knowledge. They became vocal dissenters; their critiques addressed both their own and others' experiences as women. However, the Girl Power movement was also concerned with experiences of race, class, and sexuality. As a result, the Girl Power movement is viewed by many who study girl culture as a prime example of what can be called youth feminism (Garrison 2000, p. 142).

Alternative Origins. An alternative origin of the concept Girl Power has been put forth by Laurel Gilbert and Crystal Kile, the authors of *Surfer Grrrls* (1996). They suggest that the idea of Girl Power came out of the phrase "You go, girl," which was popularized by young African American women as a statement of encouragement to each other in the late 1980s. Others suggest that it was not the white punk music scene but rather black Hip Hop music that spawned and continues to support the changing modes of femininity understood as Girl Power. Some have also claimed that Girl Power as a movement began much earlier than the 1980s or 1990s, in the call-and-response rhythms of the girl groups of the 1960s. From this perspective, it seems that the Girl Power phenomenon owes its longevity to a long history of relations between black and white women, particularly in music.

the Riot Grrrls' "unifying principle is that being feminist is inherently confusing and contradictory, and that women have to find a way to be sexy, angry, and powerful at the same time."

Appendix G
Representations of Masculinity Worksheet

Stereotype	Description	Examples
The 'Macho'	According to sociologist, Scott Coltrane, in macho culture **'men parade their masculinity through combative posturing and sexual conquests'.** Other macho characteristics include men being: • Denied permission to cry • Always being competitive • Trying to be the best • Never retreating • Not getting emotionally involved	
The liberal, sensitive 'New Man'	• An alternative representation of men • Has a social conscience e.g. he will re-cycle • Non-oppressive relationships with women, children and other men i.e. Not sexist or competitive • Sensitive, in touch with his own feelings and the feelings of others • Embraces family life and parenthood • Predominantly middle class	
The 'Lad'	• Relates to 'Lad Culture' associated with 1980s and Brit Pop • Dominated by the male pastimes of drinking, watching football, and by sex. • Represents a retreat to a male-only world of pubs, pornography, and football. • Predominantly working class • Associated with sexism	
The 'Professional'	• Power derived from intelligence and talents • Assertive and competitive • Ruthless when making decisions	
The 'Inept Bungler'	• Sensitive, trustworthy and vulnerable • Mild-mannered, in touch with feelings • Often inarticulate and 'tongue-tied' • Often dysfunctional, tries to do the right thing, but often gets it wrong	

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Appendix H
Representations of Women Worksheet

Representations of Women

It is often argued that the dominant representations of women are largely constructed to appeal to the male spectator - even in texts which target women.

Theorists have tried to explain this idea and the cultural effects such representations might have.

Categorizing Facial Expressions

Marjorie Ferguson (1980) identified four types of facial expression in the cover photos of British women's magazines:

- **Chocolate Box:** half or full-smile, lips together or slightly parted, teeth barely visible, full or three-quarter face to camera. Projected mood: blandly pleasing, warm bath warmth, where uniformity of features in their smooth perfection is devoid of uniqueness or of individuality.

- **Invitational:** emphasis on the eyes, mouth shut or with only a hint of a smile, head to one side or looking back to camera. Projected mood: suggestive of mischief or mystery, the hint of contact potential rather than sexual promise, the cover equivalent of advertising's soft sell.

- **Super-smiler:** full face, wide open toothy smile, head thrust forward or chin thrown back, hair often wind-blown. Projected mood: aggressive, 'look-at-me' demanding, the hard sell, 'big come-on' approach.

- **Romantic or Sexual:** a fourth and more general classification devised to include male and female 'two-somes'; or the dreamy, heavy-lidded, unsmiling big-heads, or the overtly sensual or sexual. Projected moods: possible 'available' and definitely 'available'.

List of Abbreviations

A2 – Advanced Two

AS – Advanced Subsidiary

AQA – Assessment and Qualifications Alliance

BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation

BFI – British Film Institute

BMI – Body Mass Index

BTEC – Business and Technology Education Council

CCEA – Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment

CCS – Critical Social Science

DfE – Department for Education

DIY – Do It Yourself

EMC – English and Media Centre

FE – Further Education

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

IB – International Baccalaureate

JCQ – Joint Office for Qualifications

LEA – Local Education Authority

MP – Member of Parliament

NQT – Newly Qualified Teacher

OCR – Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OFCOM – Office of Communications

OFQUAL – Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation

OFSTED – Office for Standards in Education, Children's Service and Skills

PGCE – Post Graduate Certificate in Education

PSHE – Personal, Social and Health Education

QCA – Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

QCDA – Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency

QTS – Qualified Teacher Status

RSA – Royal Society of Arts

STA – Standards Testing Agency

UK – United Kingdom

US – United States of America

WJEC – Welsh Joint Education Committee