# 8

# Representations in moving-image media stories

## ABOUT REPRESENTATION

Ninety-five per cent of characters killed in films and television entertainment shows are men. In action movies, horror movies and Westerns, most of these males are dispatched without any mourning.

On the other hand, after decades of modern feminism, more than 30 per cent of advertising still portrays women as slim, blonde and less than 30 years old. A different standard applies to men. At least half the men were portrayed as being over 30, according to a survey by the Broadcasting Standards Council in Britain. Male actors are frequently dark haired, in contrast to the typical blonde woman. In advertising, only 11 per cent of men are slim and muscular, the remainder being a variety of body weights. While a male ideal definitely exists, men are 'allowed' a greater range of body types. And in an interesting tradition, again according to the Broadcasting Standards Council, women are almost never shown in the driver's seat when men and women travel together.

It is not only gender analysts who are crying foul over characterisation in the media. Members of commonly portrayed professions are also irritated.
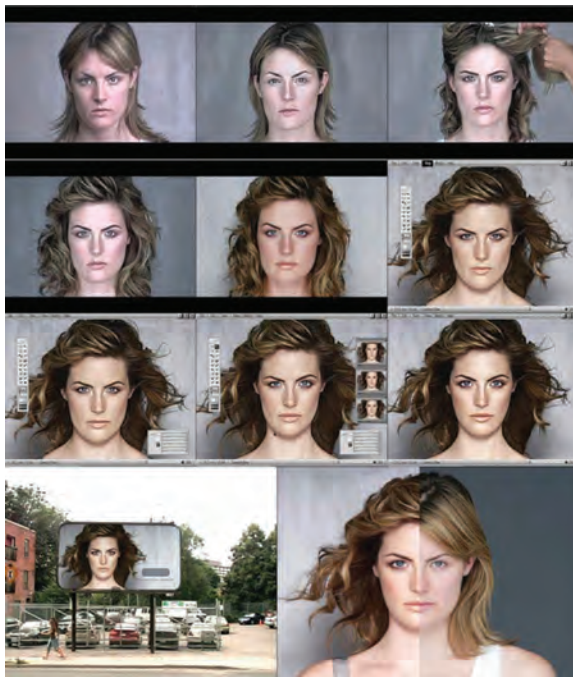
8.1.1
Diversity in
broadcasting

8.1.2
TV broadcasting
data and
research



© Unilever

**Figure 8.1** Shots from the Dove Evolution campaign showing how an ordinary woman was transformed into a glamorous media image. The media representation is not the same as real life; instead it is a selected, constructed, even Photoshopped re-presentation of it.

While 20 per cent of male television characters are involved in law enforcement, this applies to only 1 per cent of real-life men. Police officers say the result is that the media often give the public unrealistic expectations.

The media do not present reality – they represent it by offering a selection of reality. In the case of television, the scriptwriter, camera operator, editor and producer all make selections and changes. Newspaper stories go through a similar process of selection involving the journalist, subeditor and editor.

Media products, consisting of only a selection of manufactured ideas, are not the same as lived experience. This manufactured version is based on the values of the producers and, in turn, the values of the larger society and culture. The media version is said to be not a presentation but a 're-presentation'.

A media **representation** is a depiction, a likeness or a constructed image. It is how the media show the world as they see it – it is their version of reality. It is useful to think of a media image as being constructed in the same way that a building or bridge is constructed – out of lots of parts, and by teams of people. A media representation is created through a series of choices and selections made by the producers. It is constructed or built out of these choices, and then re-presented to audiences. Each media form has its own way of constructing representations, and therefore there will be differences in representations across media forms because of this factor alone.

Media representations can be thought of as resembling reality, rather than actually being real. However, it is possible for an individual to decide that some representations may be closer to their own experiences than others. Audiences interpret media representations and create their own meanings from them based on their own experiences of the world.

Representation can also refer to the processes the media use to create media products. In this usage, it refers to how the media text is constructed and how meaning is communicated.

## Types of representations

Representations can be grouped into categories that regularly appear in the media. A representation can depict:

- individual people as themselves (such as the prime minister in a news story)

8.1.3
What is
representation?

**Figure 8.2** (a) The representation in this image of a family from the 1950s suggests the woman's place is in the home. The man's role is to provide financially and allows a minimum of involvement in family life. (b) A 1990s image of a family includes the father within the family circle and suggests through body language and clothing that the mother is an equal partner in all things, probably including employment. However, the family is still represented as a conventional nuclear family. (c) This modern image of a family suggests that single parenthood may be a likelihood, while maintaining the possibility that the rest of the family is elsewhere in the house. The portrayal of the father as a potential single parent is an innovation on the typical portrayal of a woman as the single parent.

- individual people as characters (such as the US president in the 1996 film *Independence Day*)
- social groups (such as age groups, gender groups or racial groups)
- institutions or organisations (such as the government)
- ideas (such as law and order or unemployment)
- events (such as European settlement of Australia or the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001).

A representation can be a single image, a sequence of images or a whole program, written words, spoken words or song lyrics.

## How representations work

Representations invite audiences to understand them and agree with them in certain preferred ways. However, depending on the audience, different interpretations are to some extent possible.

Representations work in the following ways:

- **A representation consists of repeated elements.** The more we see these elements repeated, the more the representation will appear to be natural or normal.
- **We are invited either to identify with or to recognise the representation.** Producers of the media representation may have a view of the world that is similar to our own. If their representation fits in with our view of who we are, we may choose to identify with it. This happens, for example, when a movie invites us to imagine ourselves in the role of an appealing character. On the other hand, the producers may see a person, idea or event as somehow foreign or different from them. We will then be invited to recognise the representation from our own experience. A program might invite us to identify

with the lawyer hero, for example, but will ask us only to recognise the law-breaking young thugs.

- **The media make categories of people, events or ideas.** Categories include labels such as 'the unemployed', 'the aged' or 'businessmen'. The war in Iraq, for example, becomes 'another Vietnam'. Representations are generalisations about categories and why events, ideas or people belong in them. These categories then become part of our thinking processes.
- **Representations contain a point of view.** The meaning in a representation will be selected and constructed, already containing built-in value judgements. All representations contain the point of view of the people who made them.
- **Representations have a mode of address.** Hidden behind the apparent naturalness of the representation will be some assumptions about who you are. For example, a news item about youth may address you in a manner that assumes you are a middle-aged businessperson rather than a young person.

### Selection, construction and omission

Representations are presented to an audience after a process of selection, construction and omission. Selection of some elements over others means that only certain aspects of the chosen actuality are depicted. Omission of other elements means that different sides of the story are not presented. Omissions are sometimes referred to as 'silences'. It is the choice of the people producing the representation whether or not to leave out certain elements. Often they do this because those elements do not support the point of view they want to convey.

**Figure 8.3** The representation and the reality can be two quite different things. This 2006 campaign poster in the US was prepared by feminist culture jammers Guerrilla Girls (see 'culture jamming'). 'We took Kong, gave him a sex change and a designer gown, and set her up in Hollywood, just a few blocks from where the Oscars will be awarded,' they said. As for the Oscar: 'We redesigned the old boy so he more closely resembled the white males who take him home each year!'

Construction of a representation is always a human activity. It is not possible for a representation to be assembled without human involvement. Therefore, the representation will always contain a human point of view or perspective. Producers construct representations to suit their own purposes and to appeal to audiences.

## Questioning representations

To be more critically aware of a representation, the following six questions need to be asked:

1   Who made it?
2   When was it made?
3   What are its purposes?
4   Who benefits from the representation or whose point of view does it support?
5   Who does not benefit or whose point of view is not considered?
6   Who or what is not shown?

## Analysing representations

There are at least four main ways of analysing representations, according to sociologist Eoin Devereux. These are:

- **Codes and conventions.** Representations can be understood by analysing the technical and symbolic codes that are used to communicate (see chapter 13). For instance, the representation

of women in the 'girl power' phenomenon of the late 1990s and early 2000s can be analysed by looking at the symbolic codes of costume, and also the technical codes of shot angle and shot size.
- **Discourses.** Understanding the discourse that a representation is part of can help explain how it works (see 'discourses', chapter 9). For instance, it is easier to analyse representations of race or religion if you understand the discourse of such political issues as immigration or the 'war on terror'.
- **Framing.** A representation can be framed within a certain viewpoint or it can be shown only within a certain context. For example, in Australian commercial television, poverty is usually framed as an individual problem or perhaps just 'bad luck'.
- **Narrative analysis.** Often a person or an event can be packaged as belonging to a certain kind of familiar story or pattern. In this way, for instance, whole nations can be represented as 'bad guys' or 'good guys' because it fits the pattern of many Hollywood movies.

## Stereotypes

The word **stereotype** comes from the printing trade. Stereotyping was the creation of a solid metal printing plate that exactly duplicated a

tray of movable type, the letters of which had to be placed one by one. Until the invention of the stereotype, this movable type had to be reset if a second printing was needed. The stereotype revolutionised printing, allowing cheap editions of books to be made.

A stereotype now means an oversimplified, clichéd image, repeated so many times that it seems to have established a pattern. It is a highly judgemental type of representation. In the same way that the image on the metal printing plate is fixed and repeated from the original, so the modern stereotype is often applied whatever the circumstances.

One well-known female stereotype is the dumb blonde, and a common male stereotype is the foolish, incompetent father. The history of the media provides a long list of stereotypes, including the housewife, the nuclear family and the action hero.

### Stereotypes and representations

Stereotypes are an extreme form of representation. They are constructed by a process of selection. Certain aspects are focused on and then exaggerated. At the same time, an evaluation is made and the audience is invited to make a judgement, which is often based on prejudice. Repetition establishes stereotypes and, over time, allows them to appear 'natural'.

In the extreme, stereotypes can become caricatures resembling cartoons. Jokes, cartoons and comedies rely on stereotypes because they are instantly recognisable – a kind of shorthand that everyone understands.

Many groups in society have stereotypes associated with them. These contain limited and distorted views. For example, in a study of the image of scientists, Dr Roslynn Haynes of the University of Tasmania came up with six stereotypes that have existed since the 1500s. These are:

- the evil scientist or alchemist (Dr Strangelove)
- the noble scientist (Einstein-like characters, common in 1950s films)
- the absent-minded scientist (Professor Brainard in *Flubber* [1997])
- the inhuman researcher (Rotwang in *Metropolis* [1927])
- the adventurer (Dr Grant in *Jurassic Park* [1993])
- the crazed scientist whose projects get out of control (Dr Frankenstein and Dr Jekyll).

Stereotyping is often evident when there is a power imbalance between members of society. Relations between men and women, for example, can encourage the development of stereotypes on both sides. In the same way, disadvantaged minority groups often have stereotypes associated with them.

## Counter-stereotypes

Many groups of people suffer from negative portrayals in the media. Since the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, certain minority groups have been able to demand more of a voice and a more positive portrayal. In Australia, various ethnic groups and, to some extent, Indigenous people have met with some success in demands for more positive portrayals.

### Counter-stereotypes and representations

A **counter-stereotype** is a portrayal that deliberately sets out to change an earlier representation or seeks to portray a group in a positive light. There is debate about whether counter-stereotypes are a good or bad thing. Some argue that they can empower or help minority groups. Others have argued that counter-stereotypes hinder the progress of minority groups because the positive portrayals often hide the real difficulties that these groups encounter.

Counter-stereotypes can also encounter audience resistance and work to uphold the traditional portrayal. The humour of the character Token Black in *South Park* (1997–) is partly based on this factor.



**Figure 8.4** The characters Eric Cartman and Token Black from *South Park* (1997–). There is debate about whether counter-stereotypes help or hinder minority groups.

There are two main factors behind the rise of counter-stereotypes:

- **Economic power.** When a group gains sufficient spending power to convince advertisers to target it, media representations often change in response. For instance, the African–American market in the US is strong enough to have encouraged more television and film producers to portray the lives of African Americans and depict them as three-dimensional characters.
- **Political power.** Some groups have been able to use legislation or community pressure to achieve a more positive representation. Women's groups initially used the political process but are now recognised as an important economic force as well.

## 8.1 ACTIVITIES

1   Images, ideas and representations have a history. Search through old television programs (on DVD or YouTube) or old magazine advertisements to find representations that no longer fit today's cultural and social context. Respond to the areas of activity in the following table.

| EXPLAIN | ANALYSE | APPRAISE |
|---|---|---|
| **Explain** the imagery in the representation, **identifying** key aspects of the representation. **Provide additional information** about **examples** from the program or ad that seem outdated. **Identify** the use of particular **codes and conventions** in the representation. | **Analyse** each **constituent part** of the representation, considering its connotations and denotations, and interpreting their meanings. **Evaluate** the 'fit' with today's representations and values, **considering** the **strengths and limitations** of the representation in today's terms. | **Appraise** the worth or status of the representation to audiences of the time, considering what you know about society at that time. **Draw conclusions** about the **significance** of the representation as an example of changed community values. |

2   Modern representations may come to look as dated in the future as 1950s representations do today. Examine some modern representations using the six questions detailed in this section (see page 180).
    **Explain** your responses to each question, **demonstrating** your understanding and referring to **particular characteristics** of the representation.
    **Analyse** some representations (such as images of youth) across different media and compare the results in each media platform or medium. Representations could be chosen from Table 8.1. **Examine** each **constituent part** of the representation to **interpret** the meanings and **consider** how they change depending on the platform.

**Table 8.1** Suggested media representations for analysis

| REPRESENTATION CATEGORY | SPECIFIC EXAMPLES |
|---|---|
| People | Politicians, movie or rock stars, sports personalities, historical characters |
| Groups | Occupations, families, youth groups, political groups |
| Places | Tourist destinations, city versus country, local regions, overseas countries |
| Ideas | Law and order, the future, political points of view, the environment |

3   Select a theme and explore its representation across several different media or over time. Themes could include age, gender, race or social class.
    **Analyse** the representations, **examining** each **constituent part** of the representation to **interpret** the meanings and **consider** how they are portrayed across different media or across time.
    **Explain** the results of your investigation, giving examples to illustrate your points.
4   Search online and find examples of stereotypes.
    **Explain** the way they express their point of view through various features. **Identify** the **particular qualities** and **characteristics** that are used to communicate the point of view. For example, a five-o'clock shadow (darkly stubbled cheeks) on a cartoon character suggests criminal associations.
5   Review the current cast of television characters across a range of programs and evaluate whether any of them is a counter-stereotype.
    **Analyse** their role in the program, and **consider** the **constituent parts** of the character and the connotations of these.
    **Explain** your decision, **clarifying** the meaning of the role.

6   Research the development and changes in a particular representation over several stages in a historical period. Prepare a five-minute oral presentation. Present your findings to the class in the form of a lecture or seminar.
   Analyse the representation at each stage over the time period, interpreting the viewpoints and ideologies they contain. Consider the social and cultural contexts that created the representations.
   Explain your findings, including television or film excerpts to illustrate points as you make them.

7   Select one of the following topics, and then create an advertisement in a medium of your choice (such as a magazine or radio advertisement). Note that your advertisement does not have to be for a product directly related to the representation. For example, a television advertisement for chocolate bars used a rowdy classroom of primary schoolers sneaking chocolate under the desk while a kindly but incompetent teacher attempted to begin the lesson. In this example, a negative representation of a teacher was used to sell a totally unrelated product.
   Synthesise an advertisement based on a selective, positive representation of a group that mainstream culture has failed to represent fairly. A model for this could be the positive advertising representations of women in positions of power or with successful careers. Try this for another under-represented group, combining elements into a video and solving problems as you create.
   Synthesise an advertisement for a magazine of your choice based on a selective negative representation of a group that has always enjoyed safe, positive representation from mainstream culture. For example, doctors are often represented as wise, concerned, self-sacrificing care givers. Businesspeople have also tended to enjoy positive representation, as have teachers. Try this for another over-represented group, combining elements into a video, solving problems as you create.

8   Dress as a well-known stereotype and photograph yourself. Repeat the process for several other stereotypes until you have a folio of five or six images.
   Explain each stereotype and indicate its defining features. Point out where you have seen the stereotype before.

# REALISM AND REPRESENTATIONS

The human brain is set up to believe that 'seeing' and 'existence' or 'reality' are the same thing. This gives us a special problem when it comes to our understanding of media representations. Seeing something in the media is not the same as being there, even though we may feel we have experienced it.

Mediation is the process through which the difference between the media representation and the real world is created. Mediation happens at each stage of media production as representations are selected and constructed. This is the human factor in creating representations.

It is only through our knowledge of the constructed nature of media representations that we can separate out the media portrayal from actuality. According to Torben Grodal (author and professor emeritus of Film Studies at the University of Copenhagen), to do this we need three understandings:

1   an understanding of the media representation (gained by watching a film, for example)
2   an understanding of what the 'real' world looks like (from daily life)
3   an understanding of the differences and similarities between the representation and the real world.

Realism is the degree of perceived closeness between the media text and the reality it depicts. The degree of similarity between our knowledge of the real world and what we see in the media representation will determine whether or not we see the representation as realistic. Thus, the role of the audience is crucial. They need to connect with the media text and reference it to their own lives. Each audience member has to decide if the media text is real enough for them. The realism of a media text is a very important part of our relationship with it. It applies to news when we ask, 'How true is it?' It also applies to films or television dramas when we ask, 'How lifelike is it?' Some media texts, such as animations, can look completely unrealistic and yet be accepted because other aspects are believable.

Hyper-reality is an idea proposed by Jean Baudrillard (1927–2007), a French philosopher. He suggested that eventually we might become so unable to distinguish the media image from the real thing that the two would blend together into something he called hyper-reality. In hyper-reality,

people may find themselves so closely involved in the media world (or the virtual world), that they lose connection with the physical world.



Figure 8.5 More real than real, Disneyland is often suggested as an example of hyper-reality where it seems more desirable to live in the fake world than the real one outside.

## How representations are seen as realistic

Representations are gradually accepted by society by being repeated often enough, and by appearing to be realistic.

### Naturalisation

If something is repeated often enough, we will come to see it as normal and realistic. This process is called **naturalisation**. For instance, in the Middle Ages when it was thought that the Sun rotated around the Earth, the idea seemed completely normal and supported by observable 'facts'. The idea was repeated so often that it was completely naturalised and to suggest anything else was seen as traitorous.

Naturalisation is often assisted by power relationships. The more a media text is aligned with the views of the powerful in society, the more readily it will be accepted as realistic. Sufficient backing from other powerful sources will allow even quite unrealistic representations to be accepted as realistic. Other media texts that contain the same depictions can also lend support to the naturalisation process – there is strength in numbers, and audiences may be convinced.

### Suspension of disbelief

Belief in the story world is necessary when watching a moving-image media production.

8.2.1
Suspension of disbelief

This is the **suspension of disbelief**. Whatever reservations people have about the story, they tend to put them aside just to let the story progress. This can also mean accepting the representations that are depicted in the story. It is necessary to do this to some extent in order to keep watching.



Figure 8.6 The media do not provide a direct 'window on the world' that shows exact reality. Instead, audiences are persuaded to suspend disbelief. Then, through the processes of mediation and naturalisation, audiences come to accept that media representations are realistic, although not real.

## Types of realism in media representations

Media texts can display several different types of realism that allow them to be accepted by audiences:

- **Surface realism.** If the basic details look similar to those of real life, audiences will find it easier to match their own ideas of reality to what they see in the media text. If it looks right and sounds right, then it is easy to assume that it must *be* right.
- **Descriptive realism.** When a lot of effort is put into describing things, the sheer volume of detail can convince people. Film, for example, is easily able to do this. There is so much detail even in a single shot that audiences can feel like they are actually there.
- **Emotional realism.** If the reactions of the characters to the events they are going through are similar to what audience members might feel in their own lives, audiences will accept the representation. The characters have to be believable.
- **Narrative realism.** What happens in the story will determine whether audiences accept the

representation. There is no use in having a believable setting and believable emotions if the chain of events is unrealistic.

- **Content realism.** News and documentary programs often present this kind of realism. They show reportable events happening in real locations.
- **Technical production realism.** The more the technical production is able to make the representation resemble the lived experience of audience members, the more realistic it is assumed to be. Examples of this include:
  - **Shot sizes and angles.** An eye-level shot may be seen as more realistic than an extreme high angle shot, simply because it is more like human experience.
  - **Transitions.** A zoom may seem less realistic because the human eye cannot perform this action. A fade to black may be accepted because it is similar to blinking or falling asleep.
  - **Sound.** Noise from what is assumed to be the real world will be accepted more readily than an orchestral score accompaniment.
  - **Lighting.** Natural-looking lighting will height-en the audience members' sense of realism.
  - **Computer generated imagery (CGI).** Even fantastical creatures and events can be given believability using CGI.

## Blurred realism

Blurred realism refers to the way in which documentary techniques and fiction filmmaking are coming together stylistically. Fiction filmmakers are using certain techniques in an attempt to bring a sense of documentary-style authenticity to the representation. The techniques include available lighting (instead of 3-point lighting), handheld camera work, surveillance-style footage, loosely scripted dialogue and shots edited in a rough manner without any thought given to match-on-action or continuity.

The handheld camera, poor focus and haphazard composition normally reserved for documentary was strategically employed in *The Bourne Identity* (2002) and *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004). Many critics argued that the substitution of this crude and awkward cinematography brought the audience a step closer to 'being there' – having a actual lived experience of events. The formal style of classic cinematography was seen as distancing for the audience.

The use of surveillance-style footage in *Paranormal Activity* (2007) operated in a similar fashion, shifting the nature of the otherworldly from possible to plausible. The intensity of the climax is certainly informed by the assumption that surveillance footage features unmodified events. For viewers, the climax is not just about the revelation of a ghost for the purposes of story but a documentation of a legitimate paranormal event. Ghosts are suddenly 'real'.

Realist aesthetics are increasingly appearing in cinema, indicating that filmmakers are acknowledging the persuasive power in this kind of convergence. Realist aesthetics originate from documentary and have functioned as a part of the documentary form for many decades. Viewers are already familiar with many of these techniques and their associated meanings.

When realist aesthetics appear in fiction films, viewers have a tendency to interpret the communication with a sense of seriousness usually given to news or documentaries. As a result, their emotional investment becomes more intense. More and more filmmakers are discovering the advantages that realist aesthetics bring to the practice of storytelling and successful audience engagement.

### 8.2 ACTIVITIES

1. Make a list of films or television programs that have been set in locations that you are familiar with.
   Explain whether your familiarity with the area makes the media text more or less realistic for you.
2. Refer to each of the listed types of realism.
   Construct a list of media texts that relied on that type to convince the audience.
   Explain your reasoning for including the text in your list.

## REPRESENTATION AND REAL LIFE

How far away are media representations from real life? In the words of communications professor David Morley at the University of London, media representations are '… chronically overpopulated by professionally successful, physically fit, white, sexually attractive middle and upper-class people'.

Just what is considered to be 'real life' is enormously difficult to define, even if it seems a

relatively simple idea. The discipline of philosophy has grappled with the question of 'reality' for thousands of years. A modern view of this question is that reality and real life are mediated in the same way that the media are. We do not experience life as some objective experience, but instead we have our view of reality passed on to us (or mediated) by other people – parents, school, friends and so on. Every day that we interact with other people, we have our idea of reality constructed.

If it is hard to define reality, then comparing media representations to it is going to be a very difficult process. This difficulty is compounded because actual life exists just because it does, whereas media representations exist for very specific purposes. Representations are created to appeal to audiences, to entertain and to sell products. The two do not share a common purpose.

## Making comparisons between representations and reality

Our real-life experiences are much more limited than our media experiences. Most media consumers never experience war, step inside a courtroom or undertake a car chase. Yet we are all familiar with the media representations of these things. How close to reality they are, most of us cannot say. In the same way, unless an Australian has actually been to the US, they have no way of knowing whether their favourite television show is close to real life, or far from it. It is the same with representations of the past; unless you lived in that time, you would have difficulty in comparing representation with reality.

**Figure 8.7** American helicopters in 1968 during the Vietnam War flying over rice paddies looking for Viet Cong guerrillas. It is impossible to go back to the past, and there is no way of matching media representations to our own experience unless we have actually been there. Large amounts of what we know, which isn't first-hand experience, come from the media.

Just because it might be difficult to compare representations with reality or lived experience doesn't mean it isn't worth trying. There are other ways of gathering information about the world than by consuming media texts.

### Statistics

The world represented in the media can be compared with the world according to collected facts and statistics. Statistics provide useful indicators about how people are living in the real world. Those who gather the data are completely outside media organisations and therefore have other purposes for the information. Statistics use collated data expressed in numbers collected from multiple (sometimes hundreds or thousands) of individual experiences.

There have been many studies of how the media world differs from the actual world. Often these are done by content analysis. The content of the media text has been compared to statistics from the real world in thousands of different areas, including the portrayal of women, men, different occupations, people of different age groups and so on.

One long-running study has been George Gerbner's Cultural Indicators Project. It began in 1967 and ran for more than 30 years. Every year it analysed one week of television viewing and scored the programs for hundreds of different aspects of life. The following are among its findings:

- In the 1970s, women made up only 27 per cent of the television world, increasing to about 35 per cent by the 1990s.
- In the 30-year period of the project, women were twice as likely to be portrayed as wives as men were to be portrayed as husbands.
- Older people in that 30-year period were four times less likely to appear on television than be present in real life.
- Poor and working-class people were 10 times less likely to appear on television than be present in real life.
- Doctors, lawyers and judges were vastly over-represented.
- Violence happened on television much more often than in real life, occurring four to six times an hour.
- Just 1 per cent of television characters were shown to have a mental illness, but 70 per cent of these were violent (real rates of violence among the mentally ill are low).

Researchers Jake Harwood and Karen Anderson (2002) have investigated how often characters of a certain age range appear on US prime-time television compared with their frequency in the actual population according to United States Census data (US Census Bureau, 2010). Their findings are shown in Table 8.2.

### Anecdotes and oral history

Another way of comparing media representations with reality is to investigate the stories of people who have direct experience of the events. Anecdotes are personal stories, and oral history is the collection of information through interviews, memoirs, personal recollections and so on.

### Academic social analysis

Media representations can also be compared with the detailed investigations of society carried out by university academics or social commentators from various institutes set up for such purposes.

**Table 8.2** Comparison of prime-time television character populations in selected age ranges compared to actual US populations in similar age ranges. Teenagers and young children are substantially under-represented. Characters in their 20s through to their 40s are over-represented.

| AGE RANGE | PRIME-TIME TELEVISION PERCENTAGE | PERCENTAGE OF THE ACTUAL POPULATION ACCORDING TO US CENSUS DATA (AGE RANGES DO NOT MATCH EXACTLY) |
|---|---|---|
| 0–9 years | 1.9% | 24% |
| 10–18 years | 9.7% | |
| 19–34 years | 40% | 40% |
| 35–44 years | 27% | |
| 45–64 years | 18.7% | 26% |
| 65 years and over | 2.5% | 13% |

## 8.3 ACTIVITIES

1   Compare the media portrayal of reality with statistics from a reliable source, such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics (see weblink). Choose an area of actuality for which statistics are widely available, such as female participation in the workforce or percentage of the population in certain occupations. **Analyse** the representations or portrayals of reality. **Examine** each **constituent part** of the media depiction and compare it with the statistical reality. **Make a judgement** about the **strengths and limitations** of the media portrayal based on the statistical research.

2   Interview a friend or family member who can remember a particular event, or even a suitable decade (such as the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s), and ask them to compare their memories with a film or television program that is set in the same decade.
    **Explain** your findings, providing **additional information** about the event or topic, and **illustrating** it using your interviewee's examples and stories.

8.3.1
Australian
Bureau of
Statistics

# REPRESENTATION OF GENDER

'Changes in television images have not always paralleled actual changes in society. Particularly with regard to the depiction of women, we can see how social values mediate between changes in the real world, the images that become available on television, and viewers' choices of television images to watch.'

**Andrea Press**, Professor of Media Studies and Sociology, University of Virginia

Mainstream media, and especially Hollywood, are often some distance behind changes in society. There have been many examples of this apart from how mainstream media depict gender. For instance, most of the anti–Vietnam War movies did not come out of Hollywood until the early 1980s, whereas the anti-war protests took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the war ended in 1975.

William F. Ogburn's theory of cultural lag states that different parts of modern culture do not change at the same rate. Some parts are changing rapidly and other parts slowly. But since everything is interrelated, a rapid change in one part will eventually require a change in the other parts.

## Changes in gender portrayal

The breadth and depth of the various media make it difficult to generalise about gender portrayal, but content analysis provides a guide. Content analysis





**Figure 8.8** James Bond (Sean Connery) in *From Russia With Love* (1963) and James Bond (Daniel Craig) in *Casino Royale* (2006). The James Bond films, which span decades, provide an opportunity to study changes in gender representation. The representation of the male hardly changes across 19 films, but the female portrayal is another matter. By the 1990s, Bond's boss is a woman and his love interests have included a martial arts expert and a nuclear scientist.

has been applied most widely to television but has also yielded some results for other media. The following are some of the findings, together with some of the opinions of media analysts.

## Pre-feminist era

Active and courageous women were portrayed in the media of the pre-feminist era. Many had careers or were portrayed as independently wealthy. However, the difference was that their world was limited because they were women, and stories often focused on how difficult they found the injustice of that.

### 1930s–1940s

Before the Second World War (1939–45), a great deal of film and magazine representation focused on women's role in the home. As the first celebrities of the Golden Era of Hollywood, women were also glamorised as fashion icons or sex sirens. There were also exceptions to these common representations. Screwball comedy films were popular around the time of the Great Depression (1929–33). They featured independent, somewhat madcap and often wealthy women who had encountered a working-class man. However, the 'battle of the sexes' that followed usually ended in the woman being tamed by marriage. Examples include *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and *His Girl Friday* (1940).



**Figure 8.9** The pin-up girl of the feminist movement, Rosie the wartime factory worker from *Rosie the Riveter* (1944). She has been rated the 28th most influential representation ever created, and it is suggested that Rosie helped jump-start the women's liberation movement.

'Television has represented the American woman as a stupid, unattractive, insecure little household drudge who spends her martyred, mindless, boring days dreaming of love – and plotting nasty revenge against her husband.'

**Betty Friedan,** author of *The Feminine Mystique*

During the Second World War, women entered the workforce in large numbers to support the war effort. Hollywood depicted women as 'keeping the home fires burning', but they were also depicted in factories and as combat nurses overseas. An example is the US wartime propaganda poster *Rosie the Riveter* (1944) publicising women at work in heavy engineering factories.

After the war, the media became obsessed with returning women to their 'proper place' in the household and converting men from daring soldiers to reliable breadwinners. The femmes fatales and amoral men of *film noir* called this effort into question.

### 1950s–1960s

While the coming of television created a different representation of women, the representation of men remained relatively constant. Advertising demanded that television appeal to the dreams of the moneyed middle class. Advertisers also didn't want anyone offended lest they decide not to buy their products.

Hollywood was forced to fight television for audiences. In the movies, the glamour of actresses such as Marilyn Monroe helped attract the crowds.

In the 1950s and 1960s, content analysis shows that only about 20 per cent of prime-time television characters were women. Few women on television were shown to be independent. Their existence was mostly bound up with their children and their husbands. They were most often pictured



**Figure 8.10** Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) helped Hollywood attract audiences back from television. But in the 1950s and 1960s, the portrayal of women was possibly more limiting than earlier representations.

in the private space of the family home and were rarely involved in public affairs. An example is the television show *I Love Lucy* (1951–57). Try as she might to escape her housewife role, the sassy Lucy always ended up being humbled.

Popular films of the era included the Westerns *High Noon* (1952) and *Shane* (1953). Television programs included *Bonanza* (1959–73) and *77 Sunset Strip* (1958–64). All of them focused on male heroes who were confident and in control. While women had important roles, they were often portrayed as frightened or in need of protection.

Little changed on television and in film during the 1960s, despite the changes happening in society and the rise of second-wave feminism. One content analysis study of television advertising found that 75 per cent of all ads showing a woman were for products used in either the kitchen or the bathroom.

## The feminist era
### 1970s–1980s

Cultural lag meant that for much of the 1970s in television and film, little changed in the representation of women, despite feminism. For instance, in the movie *Superman* (1978), Lois Lane had a career as a reporter but the focus was still on the male hero. Women's representation as sex objects continued throughout the 1970s. Nevertheless, the actual numbers of women on prime-time television did increase. Content analysis studies show that women were more than twice as likely as men to be shown in the home. The launch of the magazines *Cleo* (1972) and *Cosmopolitan* (1973) took women away from the housewife images of most other magazines.

By the early 1980s, things had begun to change. On television, *Cagney & Lacey* (1981–88) starred two women as the central characters in a crime drama. In film, the character Ellen Ripley set a new standard for a female science-fiction hero in *Aliens* (1986). Meanwhile, a 1985 content analysis of television ads shows that men and women were appearing as central figures about an equal amount of the time. Women were appearing in work roles, and men were beginning to appear in family roles.

Alamy Stock Photo/A.F. Archive

**Table 8.3** Upward trend in women's share of prime-time TV characters in the 1970s and 1980s

| YEAR | PERCENTAGE |
|------|------------|
| 1971 | 18.3 |
| 1974 | 27.8 |
| 1987 | 35.0 |

Men's representations also began to change after nearly 60 years of very narrowly limited depictions. The film *Three Men and a Baby* (1987) showed men in nurturing roles. Some action-movie heroes seemed to show greater sensitivity as well. But hyper-masculine action heroes such as Rambo also appeared in the 1980s.



**Figure 8.11** The character of Ripley in *Alien* (1979) and its sequel *Aliens* (1986) marked a turning point for the representation of women in film. As the protagonist of the films, and a fearless warrior, Sigourney Weaver's character battled on an equal basis with the men. Ripley set a trend for female characters in science-fiction films that followed.

## 1990s–2020s

*8.4.1 Gender Bias without Borders 2015 report*

'It could be said that in the 1990s, to a certain extent, program makers arrived at comfortable, not-particularly-offensive models of masculinity and femininity, which a majority of the public seemed to think were acceptable.'

**David Gauntlett**, Professor of Media and Communications, University of Westminster

In the past 30 years there have been big changes in the media depictions of both men and women. A post-modern kind of feminism called third-wave feminism is a strong influence.

*Thelma & Louise* (1991) cast two women in the leading roles as fugitives in the traditional road-trip movie genre – the villain in the story being sexism. This had not been seen before. From the 1990s, films such as *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996) and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) cast women in leading roles in action movies. On television, crime dramas such as *Law & Order* (1990–2010) and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000–15) have both male and female leads.

A content analysis of magazines has found that women's bodies are still more often objectified than men's and more often shown as body parts. A recent analysis of prime-time television has found only 3 per cent of women were portrayed as housewives during prime time. Direct comparisons are not available, but in the 1970s 30 per cent of women were portrayed as housewives in daytime television.

*8.4.2 Boys to Men: Media Messages about Masculinity*

In a 1995 content analysis of British television ads, men were shown for the first time cooking more often than women. Following a backlash from female consumers, advertisers were reluctant to show women doing housework. Only 7 per cent of ads showed women cleaning. However, many other aspects of gender representation were unchanged. Women were nearly always young and attractive. Only 10 per cent were aged over 40. Men were still more likely to be in paid employment.

A study by Jim Macnamara of the University of Western Sydney found that in the 2000s, 69 per cent of representations of males were unfavourable compared with just 12 per cent being favourable. When men were represented positively, it was often because they had 'embraced their feminine side', says Dr Macnamara.

## Male and female stereotypes
### Male stereotypes

The following male stereotypes were identified in a report called *Boys to Men: Media Messages about Masculinity* by the Children Now organisation:

- **The joker.** This type can be seen in movies such as *Ghostbusters* (1984) or *Back to the Future* (1985).
- **The jock**. Often seen in horror movies as among the first to die, the jock demonstrates his power and strength to impress women.

- **The strong silent type.** This character is in charge, acts decisively, doesn't show emotion and always gets the girl. He is commonly seen in older action movies.
- **The big shot.** Seen in gangster movies but also in movies about business and the law, he is defined by his professional status.
- **The action hero.** Since the 1980s, the action hero has become a hyper-masculine caricature. He is aggressive and uses violence to achieve his goals.
- **The buffoon.** This figure appears as a bungling father figure in television ads and sitcoms.



**Figure 8.12** Since the 1980s, the action hero has bulked up to become a hyper-masculine hero with an unrealistic penchant for brute force. This is a change from earlier representations of male heroes.

### Female stereotypes

The main female stereotypes include the following:
- **The dumb blonde.** The blonde has a long history in the film and television industries, and there are various theories as to how the stereotype developed. She is seen as coming out of the myth that women can have beauty or brains but not both. The bimbo is a variation of the stereotype.
- **The femme fatale.** This deadly woman uses her sexuality to destroy men in order to further her own ends – it is not usually love she is after.
- **The girl next door.** This is the stereotype of the sweet and trusting young woman who is portrayed as the ideal marriage prospect.
- **Gold diggers and trophy wives.** These stereotypes perpetuate the myth that women marry for money and are reliant on men to support them.
- **The career woman.** Since the 1980s, the stereotype of the career woman has become increasingly common. She is successful but can also be ruthless.

- **The housewife.** Long the favoured stereotype on television, the housewife exists only to support her husband and children.
- **The soccer 'mom'.** This is a newer stereotype of the housewife. She has an overpowering desire for her children to succeed. She drives them everywhere and still has time to go to the gym.
- **The super mum.** This woman fits everything into her life: kids, career, husband, commuting and personal development.

You can view a gender representation timeline by following the weblink.

## The Bechdel test

What became known as the Bechdel test first appeared in 1985 in the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, by American graphic artist and comedian Alison Bechdel. In the comic strip, one of the characters says she will not go to see a film unless it meets three criteria:
1 The film has to have at least two women in it.
2 The two women must talk to each other.
3 They must talk about something besides a man.

An online database devoted to applying the Bechdel test to movies has so far tested over 7500. Although it might seem easy to meet the criteria, around half of those films have failed to pass all three criteria. The Bechdel test has become well known worldwide since 2010. In Sweden in 2013, a cinema chain and cable television channel began using the test to rate some of their films. By 2017, two-thirds of the top 50 highest grossing films passed the Bechdel test.



**Figure 8.13** The Bechdel test has become a famous means of testing whether a film is equality-friendly. Only about half of more than 7500 films so far tested fulfil its criteria. Cinema experts are divided about the value of the test.

## Why many films are failing

Film critics list the following reasons many films fail the Bechdel test:

- **Fewer women behind cameras.** University of Southern California research shows that for the top 100 highest-grossing movies in 2012, just one in six directors, writers or producers were women. Figures for 2017 show barely any change.
- **Male-dominated blockbusters.** Many of the highest-grossing movies are action movies with male leads. Hollywood tends to replicate the formula to be sure of earning more money. Critics say that this does not give the audience much choice, forcing them to go to standardised movies.
- **Relationship to society.** Many feminists argue that women still face obstacles in society, and that films are reflecting that disadvantage. Only 11 per cent of lead characters (protagonists) in the top 100 highest-grossing films of 2011 were women, according to a study by the Centre for the Study of Women in Television and Film. By 2017, this figure had risen to 24 per cent.

## Limitations of the test

Many films with strong female leads, or films aimed at women, have failed the Bechdel test. *The Hurt Locker* (2008) was directed by Kathryn Bigelow, the first woman ever to win an Oscar for directing –

but the film failed the Bechdel test. The film *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), directed by a woman and with a strong female lead, also fails – because all the conversations in the film centre around the hunt for one man: Osama bin Laden. The 3D science-fiction film *Gravity* (2013) has a strong lead female astronaut, but it fails the test because there are no other female characters. *Mulan* (1998) fails the test despite the main character leading an army of warriors, because most of the other characters are men and the women talk about Mulan's marriage.

Following are some limitations of the test:

- **Surface testing only.** Many films, television programs and video games could pass the Bechdel test if some small modifications were made. It could be as simple as inserting one scene. This does not represent a major change in the way women are depicted.
- **Passing on a technicality.** Many critics say that films or television programs that are not feminist at all can pass the test. The test is not able to investigate deeper issues around the portrayal of women. The test is not able to check for violence against women, or how women are treated more generally.
- **Too much focus on gender not character.** The test does not really look at character arcs or paths. The role of the characters in the movie is not examined.
- **Binary judgement.** The Bechdel is a pass/fail test that doesn't take complexity into account.

Table 8.4 Bechdeltest.com database statistics showing the breakdown of results after the criteria have been applied.

| FILMS PASSING THE BECHDEL TEST ON ALL THREE CRITERIA | FILMS FAILING ALL THREE CRITERIA IN THE BECHDEL TEST | FILMS FAILING CRITERION TWO (THE WOMEN DON'T TALK TO EACH OTHER) | FILMS FAILING CRITERION THREE (THE WOMEN TALK ONLY ABOUT MEN) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 56% | 10% | 23% | 11% |

## 8.4 ACTIVITIES

1  Use the Bechdel test to assess some of the top films released this year. Respond to the areas of investigation in the table below.

| ANALYSE | APPRAISE | EXPLAIN |
|---|---|---|
| **Analyse** the films, dissecting and interpreting the speaking roles to **evaluate** them using the Bechdel criteria. **Make a judgement** as to whether or not the films pass the test – and whether they pass the test fully or pass just some or none of the **criteria**. | **Appraise** the films according to whether they have **worth** independent of the Bechdel test, and whether women still play **significant** roles on-screen or in production. | **Explain** the reasons for your decisions, giving **additional information** that demonstrates the process you went through, and **illustrate** with examples. |

2  Try conducting a 'reverse Bechdel test' in relation to the portrayal of males in films, television programs and video games. Analyse current movies, but also consider the following movies as possibilities: *Psycho* (1960), *The Terminator* (1984), *About Last Night* (2014) and *Juno* (2007).
   **Appraise** the **worth** of the Bechdel test as a tool that can work in a variety of situations by **systematically examining** its applicability.

3  **Construct** a collage charting changes in either the male action hero character in films or the representation of the housewife/mother figure in advertising. You will need samples from each of the key eras of media development: the pre-feminist, feminist and post-feminist eras.
   **Explain** the changes in labels attached to the collage, giving **additional information** about each stage.

4  Choose one of the following topics and discuss it in pairs.
   • Has the advertising industry overreacted in its portrayal of men? Consider representations of men in the kitchen, men as sex objects and men portrayed in beer ads.
   • To what extent has the exploitation of women's bodies in advertising decreased since the pre-feminist era? Or has it become worse?
   **Explain** your viewpoint to your partner, **clarifying** your perspective with **additional information** and **specific examples**. Present the outcome of your discussion to the class.

5  Write a report on the representation of gender in a specific medium of your choice, such as television, film or new media.
   **Explain** the representations you have chosen, **identifying** key features and **recognising** the **qualities** that each of them has.
   **Analyse** how each of the representations operates, breaking them down into **constituent parts** and separating out the **codes and conventions** used. **Interpret** the connotations of each part of the representation.
   **Appraise** the status of the representation by collecting real-world statistics to **compare** actuality with the media representation. **Draw conclusions** about the **accuracy** and **worth** of the representation.
   **Synthesise** an edited montage of the representation of males and females over time, using imagery from a collection of movies, and **solving conceptual, creative or technical problems** as they arise. Scan DVD covers, create movie stills using a capture program or download images to build the moving-image media production.