

As the Table Turns...

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In a TV lounge in a Mizzou dorm on this weekday afternoon, truths are coming to light, lessons are being learned, lives are being changed. Cole, who's spending a few days at his woodland hideaway, is trying to get in touch with his wife, Victoria, who is contemplating an affair with her co-worker and first husband, Ryan, who married her at 16 and divorced her within a year. (Sexual problems, now remedied.) Nina, meanwhile, who is now married to Ryan but contemplating an affair with Cole, whom she works for, goes to Cole's house and intercepts a note from Cole meant for Victoria. Nina takes the note as an invitation to a romantic rendezvous and heads for the woods. Can Victoria be far behind? Will the fur fly?

AN HOUR LATER, THE SCENE SHIFTS to Dr. Marlena Evans and Kristen Blake, beautiful, immaculately groomed professional women who are nearly coming to blows over the affections of John Black, whom Marlena was once married to when she thought he was someone else but whom she is still secretly in love with and whom Kristen is now engaged to because she is faking a pregnancy. (Got that?)

It's all there, as promised—truths revealed, lessons learned, lives changed. It's soap opera at its best, and the Mizzou students—mostly women—watch with rapt attention. It's a sad scene, right? Tuition money wasted, brains turned to mush, education eschewed for the puerile pap of popular culture. Not in the view of MU's Mary Ellen Brown, assistant professor of communication and author of *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance*. Her take on it? Soaps give women support, interaction and pleasure, all of which make them stronger. Soaps encourage women to examine their lives and rethink the roles society casts them in.

That's right. Soap operas—the make-believe land of size-two ingenues, vile villainesses and characters on a seemingly permanent coffee break—are a source of strength for '90s women. Surprised? You're not alone. Media critics have spent years worrying over stereotypical images of women in the media and their presumably negative effects on women's lives. Some of this is true, experts say. Stereotypical images can have negative effects. But research by Brown and others is causing us to reconsider how American women interpret images of themselves in the media. At MU, scholars from communications to sociology to journalism are discovering that American women accept some media images of themselves and reject others—both "positive" and "negative." The difference between a thumbs-up and thumbs-down from women, these scholars say, has less to do with how "positive" or "negative" the images are. It has

more to do with how much—or how little—women can do with them. If a soap opera gets you talking with other women about the issues in your life, then you've done something positive with it. Hence soap opera as strength.

Of course, these researchers say, this doesn't mean that documenting themes and patterns in American media—even "positive" and "negative" images—is unimportant. Past analyses of women on television, for example, revealed gross stereotyping and underrepresentation—findings that laid the groundwork for change. Today's television is a much more realistic place, populated by a more diverse cast of female characters than ever before. There are professional women and working-class women, married moms and single moms, women pursuing romance and women pursuing competitive surgical rotations and crime suspects.

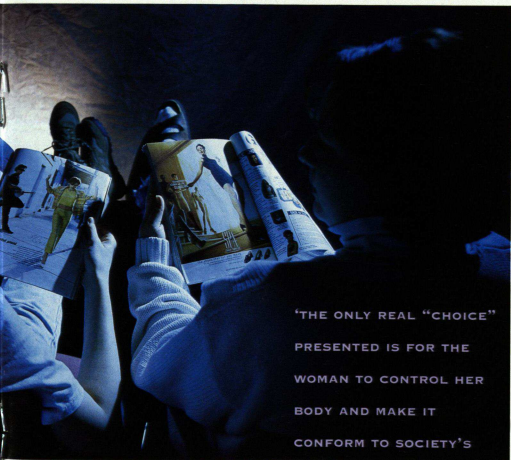
Still, studies of women's images in film and television continue to yield a wealth of interesting facts. To wit: Elderly women are nearly non-existent in the world of prime-time television. African-American women typically portray some variation on a nurturing mammy or a sexed-up, up-to-no-good Jezebel. Women over 40 are six times as likely to play a movie villain as men of the same age or younger women. Female victims outnumber powerful women in films almost two to one. Male characters outnumber female ones in children's TV shows. Television movies-of-the-week feature an alarmingly high number of "bad seed" teen girls and women in every manner of jeopardy. Prime-time TV is dominated by thin people, and thinness is associated with positive personality traits. Three of last year's Academy Award-nominees got their industry's highest honor by playing prostitutes.

But facts alone don't tell us how female audiences interpret the various images of women the media give them, Brown says. She set out to discover why soap operas, which are supposedly chock-full of sexism, exploitation and just plain trash, inspire such loyalty among their many



women viewers. To answer this question, Brown became a soap fan and watched alongside others. During these sessions and afterward, she asked the viewers open-ended questions about what their soap operas mean to them, how they get enjoyment from them and how they understand soaps and "soap culture."

On the surface, Brown says, soap operas emphasize the importance of marriage and children and other traditional concepts about women. But at the same time, soaps feature characters, plots and production values that both fit well with women's problems and invite conversation and laughter. Most soap characters are female, and 90 percent of the plot hinges on dialog—qualities that make soaps especially applicable to women's lives, Brown says. Plus, a dead character rising from the grave (for the third time) or a "Hawaii" set that looks like something from a '40s soundstage get a laugh



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from most soap fans. The talking, camaraderie, laughter and questioning soaps spawn are what become sources of strength for women. Brown says. To outsiders, she says, it may look as if women mindlessly consume soap operas, the products they advertise and the traditional ideas they're based on, all in one giant gulp. Not true. She says women who use soap operas to question their status rather than confirm their status in society are critical consumers, using the shows to rewrite traditional rules about women.

SO, IF SOAP OPERAS CAN BE INVERTED, subverted and otherwise twisted into something empowering for women, what about images from other places? Open a copy of *Cosmo* or *Glamour*, studies show, and you'll find young, beautiful, generally white women hawking fountain-of-youth alpha-hydroxy products or modeling the fashion

industry's latest clingy creation—women who weigh 23 percent less than the average American woman. Turn on the TV and you'll find more homespun versions of the same young women in nearly every ad for household cooking or cleaning products. What can the typical woman do with these images? Can she resist them, invert them, make silk purses out of supermodels' ears?

The answer, for now, seems to be "no." "Some images and messages are harder to resist than others, like the one insisting that a 40-year-old woman should have thighs like a 12-year-old boy's, and that no self-respecting woman should ever have wrinkles," writes media scholar Susan J. Douglas in *Where the Girls Are: Growing*

Up Female with the Mass Media.

Douglas says visual media traditionally take women out of their real-life protagonist roles and cast them instead in such plum parts as "blonde scrutinized longingly on beach" or "redhead gazed at adoringly on bed." "Women, much more than men, have learned that they must constantly put themselves under surveillance," she writes. Plus, she says, health and beauty advertisers have successfully hitched themselves to the women's movement handwagon and co-opted its rhetoric and themes.

Health and beauty ads today, Douglas says, feature the poster girls of the women's movement—confident, in-control, professionally accomplished. Yet how do these women demonstrate their hard-won choice and control? By getting collagen injections and working out day and night in pursuit of perfect thighs.

"In health and beauty ads that seem to emphasize the choice and control a woman has, the only real 'choice' presented is for the woman to control her body and make it conform to society's dominant image of the perfect woman— young, thin, beautiful," says Mary Jo Neitz, a professor of sociology at MU who teaches a course in the Women Studies program on body, identity and culture. Buying Abdominizers, *Buns of Steel* videos and pseudoscientific "skin defense systems," Neitz says, are ways these advertisers envision women exercising the choice and control won by the women's movement. "Their vision of empowerment is that you can make yourself fit the image."

This might be a fine—if slightly twisted—interpretation of feminism if it didn't have such negative effects on women. Today, experts say, the number of American women dissatisfied with their appearance stands at 48 percent—up from 23 percent a quarter-century ago. The American Psychiatric Association reports that both anorexia and bulimia have doubled in reported prevalence since 1970. The media cult of thinness even

holds allure for the very young. One national study found that nearly half of American schoolchildren want to lose weight—more than 90 percent of them female. Another found that five out of every 10 girls are unhappy with their bodies by age 13, and eight out of 10 dislike their bodies by age 18.

"We're certainly seeing more eating disorders," says MU's Neitz. "We know that there are things going on in the media culture, and then we see these behaviors. But it's hard to have an explanation that's tight enough so that you can predict which people who are exposed to this in the culture are going to exhibit the harmful behaviors. There are so many complex variables that it's hard to make a direct causal explanation, even if we believe it's the case."

THIS IS TRUE. SOMETIMES LIFE IS more complicated than science has ways to measure. However, recent research has helped forge that elusive link. Two studies in the early '90s found that even short exposure to TV programming or glossy women's magazines produced a distorted body image and intense feelings of depression, guilt and shame in young female viewers and readers. And what of the girls who are more likely to be bulimic? They're heavy consumers of these media.

"Advertising has been especially effective in alienating women from their faces and bodies," Douglas writes in *Where The Girls Are*. "Women of all ages, who are perfectly capable of denouncing sexist news coverage or making their own empowering and subversive meanings out of TV shows and films, find it extremely difficult to resist the basic tenet that a face with lines or a thigh with dimples means you are worthless."

Newspapers, on the other hand, are less influential. When women don't like what they read and see, they talk back to newspapers in the most painful way possible for publishers—with their pocketbooks.

"Newspaper readership among women has been dropping for years and continues to decline," says Jean Gaddy Wilson, executive director of New Directions for News, a professional journalism think tank based at MU's School of Journalism. NDN works with the news industries to foster innovation in newspapers, to make them more relevant, accessible and useful for America's changing demographic groups. The number of women who read newspapers dropped by 18 percentage points between 1970 and 1990, from 78 percent to just over 60 percent. The decline among men? About 12 percentage points, from 77 percent to about 65 percent. "The old journalistic formula in which men are the participants and women are the spectators leads to this decline," Wilson says. "Women do not buy into this false reality, and therefore they're leaving newspapers."

Pick up the average newspaper, Wilson says, and you're hard-pressed to find stories reflecting reality for women—women who today make up more than half of all professional workers, start four out of five new businesses, and outnumber men as both registered voters and college graduates. At MU women make up 26 percent of the faculty, 38 percent of law students, 41 percent of business students and 44 percent of medical students. Women in the class of '96 outnumbered men slightly—2,406 to 2,382.

Instead, Wilson says, what you find in the news is... not much. A 1996 annual survey of references to women on the front pages of such major dailies as the *Chicago Tribune* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* backs her up. The survey, conducted by the organization Women, Men and Media, found women on front pages only 15 percent of the time—an erosion of 40 percent from women's 25 percent representation in 1994. The situation is much the same in the broadcast media. The most current study of network TV news coverage found that women were the focus of stories an average of 11 percent of the time. "Female experts are



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interviewed when the topic is abortion, child care or affirmative action, but when the topic is war, foreign policy or national purpose, female voices are ignored," Douglas writes.

Even coverage of affirmative action doesn't always include women, says Lillian Dunlap, an assistant professor of broadcast journalism at MU who studies the representation of African Americans



in the news media. Dunlap analyzed 1995 coverage of affirmative action in *The New York Times* and found very few female voices. "Here is an issue that disproportionately affects white women, but there were very few women used in the newspaper as sources. The conversation did not include them."

If the "amazing disappearing woman" is one dominant theme in news coverage of women, the "controversial working mother" is another. "Like many long-standing institutions, the news media subscribe to the notion that life has two separate spheres: a public one for men and a pri-

vate one for women and children," says Darlaine Gardetto, an assistant professor of sociology at MU. A woman can be a wife and mom, or she can be involved in public life—but not both. Story after story, Gardetto says, seems to suggest that there's an inherent contradiction in simultaneously being a devoted wife, accomplished professional, loving mom and active citizen.

Her evidence? News coverage of that most famous and controversial wife, professional, mother and citizen—Hillary Rodham Clinton. Gardetto analyzes the coverage of Hillary Clinton in *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*. The stories there, she says, castigate Hillary Clinton for "trying to have things both ways" and "playing too many roles," all the while wondering bewilderedly "how the policy work can change so quickly into the caring mother." The dominant themes of the stories are the dire consequences of allowing a wife and mother into public life—a diminishing of the husband's power, dereliction of wifely duties, thorny questions about conflicts of interest.

All this might more profitably be seen as part of a wider discussion about the role of married women and mothers in public life, rather than as just about Clinton's role as first lady, Gardetto says. "The dominant message in the press is that wives and mothers shouldn't cross the public-private divide."

New Directions for News' Wilson agrees, adding that it's a possible reason why women continue to abandon newspapers. This is not an especially relevant message for women in a time when fewer than 7 percent of U.S. households consist of a husband working outside the home and a wife at home taking care of one or more children.

For women and newspapers, it seems, the link between portrayal and readership can be summed up in a tight little irony: Newspapers that hold negative, outdated images of women result in women who hold negative images of the

media. Media organizations that make women invisible in their newspapers result in women who make themselves invisible from the subscriber rolls. It's a classic stand-off.

FORTUNATELY, HOWEVER, MU'S New Directions for News has cast itself as mediator in this conflict between women and newspapers. It has identified women as one of five "invisible cities" that newspapers do not cover in proportion to reality. Wilson's group, which works with editors, demographers and media industry leaders to change that scenario, has come up with some ideas.

"The cornerstone to all of this is to change the formula of coverage so that newspapers are relevant, accessible and useful for people," she says. With women, there are any number of ways to do that, she says. Assign a fourth to half of the front page to women's experts and women's topics. Create a parenting beat, a woman-in-the-workplace beat, a relationship beat. Use home-based reporters to cover projects going on at the neighborhood level. Give more clout to the reporter who covers church groups and volunteers making a difference in their communities. Interview women involved in traditional hard news to find the emotions, relationships, stories and voices behind the bare facts.

"Simplistically, we play news as 'men are interested in movement and games, women are interested in story line,'" Wilson says. "The truth is, when both approaches are used, there is a cross-over readership in both groups."

Making these kinds of changes will be essential to the survival of all media in the future. "Discerning customers choose media that serve them," she says. "We need to create products—not just newspapers but films, TV shows, online products, all media—that women can identify with. If media organizations don't keep up with women's changing role in the world, these discerning customers will decide they want something better." ❁