

is a truly insightful book which addresses important changes in today's media landscape. It engages the reader through clear exposition, compelling examples and a lively invitation to engage in urgent debates.'

**Professor Sonia Livingstone**, *Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science*

*Media Theory for A Level* provides a comprehensive introduction to the 19 academic theories required for A Level Media study. From Roland Barthes to Clay Shirky, from structuralism to civilisationism, this revision book explains the core academic concepts students need to master to succeed in their exams. Each chapter includes:

- Comprehensive explanations of the academic ideas and theories specified for GCE Media study.
- Practical tasks designed to help students apply theoretical concepts to unseen texts and close study products/set texts.
- Exemplar applications of theories to set texts and close study products for all media specifications (AQA, Eduqas and OCR).
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*Media Theory for A Level* is also accompanied by the [essentialmediatheory.com](http://essentialmediatheory.com) website that contains a wide range of supporting resources. Accompanying online material includes:

- Revision flashcards and worksheets.
- A comprehensive bank of exemplar applications that apply academic theory to current set texts and close study products for all media specifications.
- Classroom ready worksheets that teachers can use alongside the book to help students master essential media theory.
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Cover image: STRANGER THINGS, Winona Ryder (Season 2, aired October 27, 2017). ©Netflix/courtesy Everett Collection

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Media Theory for A Level

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# Media Theory for A Level

## The Essential Revision Guide



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## 8 Feminist theory

Liesbet van Zoonen

Central to van Zoonen's feminist concerns is the idea that culture – art, film, literature, the media, etc. – plays a crucial role in informing audiences, both past and present, of the gender-based roles that they ought to assume. Her concern in investigating contemporary culture is to isolate the processes that have allowed patriarchal ideals to become the dominant ideological force that shapes gender expectations today – a force, van Zoonen argues, that has resulted in the widespread subjugation of women across society.

### Concept 1: the female body as spectacle

'A core element of western patriarchal culture,' van Zoonen writes, 'is the display of woman as spectacle to be looked at, [and] subjected to the gaze of the (male) audience' (van Zoonen, 1994, 87). Using Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic feminist readings of Hollywood, van Zoonen argues that the dominant representation of femininity in Western media is one that objectifies womanhood. From TV game shows to consumerist advertising, from fashion photography to television drama, the sexualised portrayal of women has had, van Zoonen tells us, a powerful and profound effect on male and female understandings of our gendered identities. The widespread practice of objectifying women, she argues, degrades and dehumanises females, while giving male viewers, for whom women are sexualised, an unspoken exploitative power that spills into real world relations.

Objectified representations are formed as a result of a range of highly specific creative practices, including:

- **Male gaze invites.** Female sex appeal is traditionally inferred through direct appeals to viewers using fourth wall breaks. Often those appeals are softened by head tilts or other submissive gestures to create a female passivity. Use of the male gaze also extends to products that have a predominantly female audience (female lifestyle magazines, female-oriented advertising, etc.) – thus suggesting the extent to which female subordination might be internalised by female consumers.
- **Restricting females to secondary roles.** Women are consistently led or controlled by a stronger male presence in media texts. On television they play romantic interest characters or assume supporting roles, while in magazines women are consistently positioned to pursue male-based dependence through advice and relationship-oriented content.
- **Constructing women as passive participants.** Onscreen, females are saved, they do not do the saving. Sports coverage in magazines and news, too, predominantly focuses on male performance, while advertising narratives traditionally position males in more active domestic roles such as DIY or gardening.
- **Framing women differently.** The powerlessness of women in the media is constructed through cinematic tilt downs, low eyeline compositions or soft-focus framing, while costume and make-up conventions further sexualise female media inclusion.
- **Reinforcing narrow beauty ideals.** Western beauty ideals further restrict female participation in the media to a limited number of roles. Women tend to be excluded beyond a certain age or conform to tightly controlled conventions governing physical beauty.

### *The female spectator*

van Zoonen acknowledges the potential power of female objectification, but also questions the idea that women simply adopt a masculine view of femininity as a result of media consumption and argues that a variety of audience effects might result:

- **Female identification.** van Zoonen suggests that female spectators might internalise traditional gender stereotypes that are acted out on screen and that women might come to regard media

beauty myths – the narrow definitions of ideal womanhood presented to us by the media – as something to aspire to.

- **Reading against the grain.** van Zoonen also suggests that the objectification of women by the media does not necessarily lead all women to internalise the male gaze. Audiences, she tells us, ‘are no longer ... subjected to the vicious intentions of patriarchal power and ideology, but are considered to be active producers of meaning’ (van Zoonen, 1994, 149).
- **Female genres.** van Zoonen, too, acknowledges the huge diversity of texts, some of which produce narratives, character types or representations that fall outside of the usual patriarchal mould. She

### Box 8.3 Apply it: detecting female objectification in your set texts

Use the following questions to help you construct exam ready analysis that examines the scope and impact of female objectification in your set texts.

- Do the texts limit the roles that women play?
- Are women active or passive in the set texts?
- Do the texts objectify women through composition, costuming or acting decisions?

**Exemplar: *Homeland* (OCR).** van Zoonen suggests that media-based female representations are problematic in the way they objectify women. Despite its female lead, *Homeland* certainly delivers a range of questionable moments in the set text episode – mostly via the presentation of Brody’s wife, Jessica. Her introduction to the audience via an explicit sex scene exists, arguably, to provide erotic pleasure for a male audience. Moreover, the choice of actresses playing lead female roles quietly reinforces the narrow beauty myths of Western culture. The text suggests that female worth is defined through the provision of erotic pleasures, and that those pleasures can only be achieved if women conform to a narrowly defined set of attributes based on age or physique. The impact of these moments, van Zoonen might argue, is that audiences, both male and female, internalise these representational sub-texts and, in so doing, perpetuate real world female oppression.

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draws particular attention to the theoretical work of research that has sought to examine female media forms such as soap operas and romances – acknowledging that these texts might provoke alternative readership patterns that challenge patriarchy.

### *Economic context*

van Zoonen also argues that a clear gender imbalance exists in terms of media-oriented production opportunities, with women often sidelined to administrative rather than technical or creative roles. Some pockets of the media are staffed more prominently by women but, van Zoonen argues, even these are symptomatic of wider social gender inequalities. Radio production, for instance, provides an interesting exception to the male dominated nature of the industry, but only as a result of its perceived secondary status within the sector.

Similarly, media forms that deal with issues that are connected to traditionally female roles – motherhood or domesticity – tend to be made by women. As a result, children’s television, educational programming and consumer journalism tend to be made by female practitioners, while more serious media output – news, political journalism and drama – are dominated by male media makers.

Certainly, if we look at the television-orientated set texts identified by the exam boards in 2018, we can clearly see that women were

### Box 8.4 Research it: who made your set texts?

Research the people who made your set texts and answer the following questions to help you identify the impact of those production teams on the representations created.

**Television, music video and radio:** who managed the production? Identify writers, directors and producers.

**News and magazines:** what genders are the journalists who wrote the stories in your set texts? Who are the more senior managers of the set text? Identify editors-in-chief, news editors, section editors and so on, if you can.

- Is there a noticeable gender imbalance in terms of who made your set text products?
- What are the potential effects of that imbalance on story content?



almost totally absent from the senior creative teams that constructed the episodes identified for study. Only one lead writer, Anna Winger, was represented, while only 2 of the 18 texts were directed by female personnel.

### *Political context: second and third wave feminism*

van Zoonen's writing can also be considered to be emblematic of a wider range of feminist activities that took place during the 1970s and 1980s – a disparate movement of thinkers, academics and social commentators that have been collectively labelled the feminist 'second wave'. While the feminist 'first wave' fought for the female vote in the early 1900s, second wave feminism paved the way for equal employment legislation, educational opportunities and cultural empowerment. In highlighting the patriarchal undertones of media objectification and production practice, van Zoonen was similarly hopeful that the media would open up more opportunities for female subversion and female cultural empowerment.

However, the political fervour of the feminist second wave gave way to a generation of female commentators in the late 1990s who viewed the radicalism of their predecessors as too prescriptive. The resulting 'third wave' of feminism advocated a softer feminist agenda, arguing that women themselves were best placed to choose whether they wanted to pursue traditionally female roles or seek career-orientated goals. Third wave feminism, sometimes dubbed 'girlie' feminism, suggested, too, that women could be both mothers and managers, and that the decision to objectify oneself, to use one's body for the purpose of the male gaze, was an individual choice.

Third wave feminism gathered momentum in the 1990s – the Spice Girls gave us 'girl power' whilst Destiny's Child told their female fans that they could both be '*Independent Women*' and beautiful. Third wave female representations have subsequently become a staple feature of the media, compelling the media landscape to include more powerful female representations, while also tempering those representations with values, ideals and outlooks that are traditionally feminine.

### *The feminist fourth wave*

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the more radical agenda of second wave feminism is making a comeback, with audiences using social media, primarily, to voice their criticisms regarding media objectification and to agitate for wider social change. The #MeToo movement, for example, responded to the Harvey Weinstein sex abuse

#### **Box 8.5 Apply it: third wave feminism or radical feminism?**

It is, perhaps, too simplistic to suggest that contemporary media is wholly saturated with objectified versions of femininity. Use the following questions to help you diagnose which of your set texts challenge traditional gender representations:

- Which of your set texts construct third or fourth wave oriented representations of women? In what ways do these representations construct more positive versions of womanhood?
- How do cinematography, *mise en scène*, lighting or other media language features sustain these positive representations?
- Are representations fostered by female media talent? Who are these influential female creatives?

**Exemplar: *The Killing* (AQA and OCR).** van Zoonen would suggest that traditional crime drama invokes female powerlessness. The lone wolf male detective, female-oriented victims and objectified support characters are staple features of the genre that reinforce, in van Zoonen's terms, traditional active/passive male/female binaries. Third wave depictions of women, however, have tilted the media landscape towards the creation of more complex female characters, and perhaps provide a more satisfactory description of the representational effects produced by *The Killing*. Sarah Lund is a complex female character, who maintains a traditionally-leaning female role through her family-oriented depiction, while also negotiating a career-oriented role. Her jumper clad, middle-aged characterisation, moreover, provides a further contrast to the conventional objectification strategies of the crime genre and, in doing so, produces a much needed example of gender diversity within television fiction.

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allegations – with women from across the globe using Twitter to share real world experiences of male abuse. Similarly, the online Everyday Sexism Project invites women around the globe to catalogue their experiences of sexism and to call out inappropriate behaviour.

In the media, too, there is some evidence to suggest that fourth wave feminism is radicalising female representation. Mainstream music stars like Beyoncé are articulating increasingly politicised pop personas, while TV dramas and sitcoms are giving space to a whole new generation of female writers such as Phoebe Waller Bridge (*Fleabag* and *Killing Eve*) and Lisa McGee (*Derry Girls*, *Indian Summer* and *Being Human*) – both of whom have been universally applauded for their uncompromising female characters.

### Concept 2: masculinity in the media

van Zoonen tells us that the patriarchal ideologies of Christianity banished the male form to the margins of culture. ‘From the Renaissance onwards,’ van Zoonen writes, ‘the representation of the male nude body became exceptional, always causing uproar and prohibitions’ (van Zoonen, 1994, 98). Within patriarchal societies, masculinity is constructed to be the socially dominant gender and, as a result, is more likely to be constructed as an active participant within media texts. Moreover, to allow the male form to be subject to a female gaze is censored or controlled because, van Zoonen suggests, the act of looking castrates power. In short, to look or to gaze, she argues, is to assume a position of power. To be looked at suggests, conversely, passivity and weakness.

The dominance of men within society thus leads the media to produce radically different presentations of males than it does of females. Of course, van Zoonen acknowledges the presence of sexualised male imagery in the media, and that some of those images objectify the male body, but she also argues that the male form in contemporary Western culture is, by and large, depicted in ways that allow the male subject to retain authority over the spectator. van Zoonen highlights the following features and processes associated with male representation within the media:

- **The male body is predominantly celebrated through sports imagery.** Sports photography produces representations of masculinity that are designed to connote strength and power, emphasising

movement and skill to reinforce a sense of male dominance over the reader. Perfume adverts, male fashion and so on thus draw upon sports personalities to model products – thus allowing male spectatorship to proceed without erotic objectification.

- **Male eroticisation is romanticised.** Male objectification for female audiences exists, van Zoonen tells us, but is rarely expressed in mainstream forms. When such imagery is produced, moreover, the subversive threat of male eroticisation is often limited by contextualising the imagery within a romantic as opposed to a sexual setting. In women’s lifestyle magazines, for instance, men are described in terms of their potential as relationship partners rather than as objects of sexual consumption.
- **The active gaze.** van Zoonen argues that male subjects rarely construct invitational poses. The male gaze, if directed at the viewer at all, is framed by harder body language, offering confrontation or strength rather than passivity. Masculine depictions, too, avoid objectification by directing the subject’s gaze to the edge of the frame, or directing it upwards in a show of spiritual strength.
- **Strength not weakness.** van Zoonen also draws attention to the ways in which masculine ideals in media imagery are associated with bodily strength. ‘The male pin-up’s lack of passivity is one of his important features,’ she writes, while ‘various signs of activity’ (van Zoonen, 1994, 101) are encoded into male imagery to further neutralise any potential for eroticisation.

#### Box 8.6 Apply it: are masculine ideals constructed by your set texts?

Use the following questions to construct exam ready analysis that considers the impact of masculine representations created by set texts.

- How are the male characters within your television, video game and music based set texts constructed? Do they conform to van Zoonen’s assertion that males are normally encoded as active?
- In what ways do *mise en scène*, composition and lighting sustain the representational effects of set texts?
- How significant is sports-related imagery of males in newspaper/magazine set texts?
- Do any of your set texts construct a subversive version of masculinity? How?



**Exemplar: *Life on Mars (Eduqas)*.** Both Sam Tyler and Gene Hunt reinforce van Zoonen's conclusions regarding the active presentation of masculinity by the media. Sam's high-octane car chase during the introduction to episode one clearly positions him as a conventional action hero from the very start. Similarly, Hunt's no-nonsense hard man persona provides male audiences with an outmoded representation of masculinity in which unrestrained action, male authority and violent power can be subtly celebrated. van Zoonen would suggest these portrayals help to encode real world male power and further reinforce patriarchal ideals as the dominant ideological force within Western culture.

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Table 8.1 Speak Liesbet van Zoonen

<b>Active/passive representations</b>	Media products, van Zoonen would suggest, encode women to be passive and males to be active within media imagery. Depictions that construct gender in this way reinforce male social dominance.
<b>Male gaze</b>	A stylised depiction of women that invites viewers to take erotic pleasure while viewing the female form. The female gaze is constructed through invitational poses and passive body language.
<b>Objectification</b>	An image that demeans or degrades its subject.
<b>Patriarchy</b>	A society constructed according to a male point of view which, as a result, allows males to become the dominant gender.
<b>Subversive representation</b>	A media representation that challenges or undermines an idea or set of ideas that are widely held within society.

Table 8.2 van Zoonen: ten minute revision

**Concept 1: *the female body as spectacle***

- The roles that females are expected to play within society vary enormously across different cultures and historical periods.
- The dominant representational mode in Western culture positions women as an erotic spectacle.
- Second wave feminists have challenged the dominance of men in society.
- Third wave feminists have reasserted the right of women to occupy traditional female roles.
- Fourth wave feminists continue to challenge male privilege using both mass media and social media forms.

**Concept 2: *masculinity in the media***

- Masculine depictions are not subject to the same objectification processes as females.
- Male social dominance is reinforced using active representations of masculinity.

**Two theorists who challenge van Zoonen's thinking**

- **David Gauntlett:** would argue that contemporary media products, both online and mass media oriented, offer audiences a much wider diversity of gender-based identities than is suggested by van Zoonen. This enables audiences to shape their own identities and to resist the ideological pull of patriarchy.
- **Judith Butler:** would agree with much of van Zoonen's thinking, but would suggest further that the use of gender-based labels like 'male' and 'female' mask the complex nature of sexuality. She would also argue that individuals have resisted those conventional labels by engaging in 'gender trouble'.