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Book Review: A Gender Remix or Playing a Broken Record? Gender and Popular Culture. By Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer, Cambridge, UK

### Original Citation

Burr, Vivien (2013) Book Review: A Gender Remix or Playing a Broken Record? Gender and Popular Culture. By Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer, Cambridge, UK. *Sex Roles*, 68 (7-8). pp. 514-516. ISSN 0360-0025

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Title of Review: A gender remix or playing a broken record?  
Review Author: Dr Viv Burr

Gender and Popular Culture. By Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer, Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA, Polity Press, 2012. 242pp. \$24.95 (paperback) ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4394-6.

Let me say at the outset that I like this book a lot. Although it has a few shortcomings, there is much on the plus side. To begin with, it is very well written, accessible and jargon-free without being simplistic. This is of enormous value in a book which is likely to be a recommended text for students on popular culture, media or gender courses. Illustrative examples and case studies are drawn principally from the US and UK, with the balance tipped somewhat in favour of the UK context at least in some sections of the book.

However, this book is much more than a teaching text; it goes well beyond a descriptive account of the current state of gender in pop culture, the authors frequently offering their own incisive and critical analysis. The book examines the position of women and men in popular culture across three broad spheres- production, representation and consumption- and asks whether popular culture today demonstrates a more balanced and equitable gender profile than in the past. The structure reflects these three concerns, with the book being divided into three sections of two chapters each, each part being prefaced by its own brief introduction, plus an Introduction and a Conclusion. The attention paid to these three faces of pop culture is one of the strengths of the book. In particular, the relationship between representations and consumption (addressed in sections 2 and 3 respectively), and the subsequent question of the implications of gender representations for gendered identities, are thoroughly addressed. As a social psychologist (see, for example, Burr, 1998) I found this a deeply satisfying aspect of the book. In summary, Milestone and Meyer's basic argument is that some things may appear to have changed, but not as much as might have been expected and actually there is a lot that is, depressingly, still the same (or different but not better); men are still in control of popular culture production and women are still represented within it in terms of damaging identities that feminism has long contested, and feminism itself is now constructed as irrelevant to modern women (Faludi, 1991).

In the Introduction, the authors provide the conceptual tools with which to approach the rest of the book. They lay out key theoretical debates and media concepts, as well as providing a brief but useful basic introduction to feminism. Everything is explained simply and clearly. Then Part 1 of the book (chapters 2 and 3) looks at men's and women's roles in cultural production over two time periods- post war to late 1970s and 'punk and beyond'- asking what impact the cultural changes, especially in the 1960s, had upon women's role in popular cultural production. The authors use a number of case studies to illustrate the

position of women and men in creative industries such as advertising, film and popular music.

They provide socio- cultural explanations for the relative absence of women as creators and producers within popular culture industries, broadly claiming that such work was out of keeping with popular notions of proper femininity and creativity, and restricted by mid 20<sup>th</sup> century gender roles and stereotypes about women's capabilities. For the most part, these arguments draw on established existing literature (for example Bradby, 1993; McRobbie, 1998). However, I was a little surprised to find the U.S. TV show *Mad Men* (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mad\\_Men](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mad_Men)) used as an analysis of women's position within advertising. As a show it may be well researched, but ultimately any work of fiction must be questionable as academic 'evidence'.

The same case studies, as well as an additional section on new media, are examined in the context of the cultural changes taking place since the 1970s (largely focused on the UK context), notably the rise of Punk, anti-discrimination laws and the emergence in the 1980s of new forms of cultural industries. Despite the fact that an egalitarian shift might have been expected in the pop culture industries, the authors report only modest gains for women. The reasons for this they provide have been depressingly familiar from other areas of paid work- access to jobs through existing male networks, androcentric definitions of expertise, stereotyping and gender-role 'spillover' in the workplace and a 'long hours' culture (Cockburn, 1991; Itzin, 1995; Rutherford, 2001).

I found Part 1 of the book to be the less analytical, and therefore somewhat less interesting, than the rest of the book. The case studies are mainly descriptive and although they provide a useful account of the state of inequality in the creative industries they give only an indication of the mechanisms that may be acting together to create gender inequalities. The idea of presenting 'case studies' is sound in principle- to illustrate how gender is reproduced and impacts upon women's and men's opportunities in particular contexts, highlighting issues specific to that context. However in practice the chosen case studies don't really do this; they all seem to point to similar mechanisms- stereotypes and gendered expectations, male- based definitions of creativity and expertise and male control of the industries making them hard to break into. There is little that is specific to each example that makes it worthy of inclusion as a case study. I would have liked to see at least some of the case studies used to analyse in more depth how all these factors can work together to restrict women's access to employment in the creative industries.

Part 2 (chapters 4 and 5) looks at representations of women and men respectively. The case study structure is now put aside and replaced by a fully thematic one, addressing such topics as romance, sexuality & relationships, and the body & physical appearance. The authors describe the rise of new representations of femininity, and of feminine identities, in the press, in teen and women's magazines, and in film and TV. They argue that these often appear to

offer women a more assertive sexuality and to validate the choices of career-oriented women, however these choices are limited to young women and are in any case ultimately censured in favour of a more traditional femininity: the pursuit of beauty, romance, marriage and motherhood. The authors conclude: "Looking across popular culture, it seems that the new femininity remains deeply contested". (p.90)

They go on to examine three discourses of masculinity- the 'old' (unreconstructed) man, the 'new' man and the 'new lad', and these are helpfully placed within the context of the social changes and conditions that influenced their emergence. For much of this discussion the arguments draw on a number of men's magazines, but also range across hospital and crime dramas (incidentally, I would have expected a passing reference to Yvonne Tasker's work here) as well as soaps. I found this chapter more analytically satisfying in its success at teasing out the sympathies and tensions between the discourses and in showing how potential threats to masculinity within a particular form of popular culture are effectively defused. The authors manage to bring together material on these very different cultural forms into a cohesive argument. They resist the temptation to suggest that one version of masculinity has replaced earlier ones, and instead expose the subtle ways in which features of each are able to co-exist.

In the final part of the book (chapters 6 and 7) the authors turn to how such representations are received, consumed and negotiated by audiences and users, beginning with a brief and helpful overview of the main theories of audience reception. Drawing on a range of research findings, they discuss how gender is one of a number of social factors potentially affecting reading of media texts. They then go on to consider how today's pervasive media are used by audiences to construct gendered identities, and include significant recent developments in new media and gaming.

In chapter 6 they discuss different theories of the relationship between media texts and gendered identities, and also usefully apply theoretical work from outside popular culture, such as Hollway's writings on subjective positions within discourse, illustrating their points with good examples. Although the focus of the book is clearly upon gender, the authors are always laudably cautious about the significance of this, compared to other social factors such as class, in influencing how men and women take up subject positions offered by media texts. However, they conclude that popular cultural texts play an important role in the production and reproduction of gendered identities.

Chapter 7 looks at gender and space/place. I found it somewhat less focused than earlier chapters, adopting a case study approach once more to examine gendered aspects of 'the city', youth subcultures and the use of gay spaces. The case studies are interesting in their own right, but the arguments about gendered use of space and place are less coherent, and the focus on space/place somewhat diluted by other issues particular to specific case studies, such as

youth subcultures and dress/appearance and the absence of academic attention paid to women by youth subculture theorists . Each of the case studies seem to work better either as an analysis of gender and popular culture or as an analysis of gender and space/place, but not both. So as a chapter this one works less well than some of the others in getting across a focused argument.

There were a few times throughout the book when the generally high academic standard may have slipped a little. There is sometimes a worry that the authors are cherry-picking their material to suit their argument. For example, I wonder if an alternative argument could be made about the limitations for women of conventional fictional narratives if a different range of contemporary literature written for women had been examined. However, their conclusion that “Traditional and progressive representations of masculinity and femininity co-exist” (p.144) on the whole seems a fair and well evidenced one. Occasionally the authors may over-rely on old sources to argue points about contemporary life. For example Ballaster et al (1991) is frequently cited with regard to conventional feminine ideologies in contemporary women’s magazines, and there are some sweeping statements which need substantiation.

Despite these occasional shortcomings, this is a great book. It is informative, critical and highly engaging. It covers a wide range of popular cultural forms and yet overall manages to draw together research and theory from these disparate sources to present a coherent and convincing account of gender in this field. Given the authors’ obvious secure grasp of the issues, it would be interesting to read their views on how the seemingly entrenched gender inequalities in popular culture might be addressed. Although its focus overlaps to some extent with that of earlier books (for example, Tasker and Negra, 2007) its scope and accessibility make it a welcome addition to the literature.

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