

## Question 6. New Masculinities

Is the representation of men and masculinity changing in popular culture? If so how?

Are there new relations of looking that challenge the conventional dynamics where (white, heterosexual) men own the gaze and 'others' (eg women, blacks) are the object of the gaze?

The rise of the Women's Liberation Movement and of modern feminism have brought about a deep questioning of what it is to be a woman. An indirect, yet surely inevitable, consequence of this process has been a growing questioning of what it is to be a man.<sup>1</sup> This is seen to be in a whole range of changes in men's expressed feelings, action and activities, as the attempt is made to redefine masculinity. It may be noted, for example, the development of unisex or bisexual, and the frequently apolitical blurring of gender roles in pop culture, as in the Boy George, Marilyn Manson and other members of the 'gender bender' phenomenon. Men also seem urged by both the leaders of pop fashion and commercial advertisers to change their clothes, wear make - up, skirts and jewellery. Men's images and masculinity are fragmented, softened, subtly altered by the reference and illusion. Men occasionally appear in advertisements as sensual, caring, even effeminate; the 'new man' phenomenon, a true creation of the media, is promoted in magazines and television, and sportsmen and trade unionists weep in public in times of victory and defeat. Increasingly, though not for the first time, masculinity is in 'crisis'.<sup>2</sup> This paper will assess how the representation of men and masculinity is changing in popular culture and if there are new relations of looking that challenge the conventional dynamics where men own the gaze and others are the 'object' of the gaze.

Alongside cultural changes there are at a more general, structural level, a number of major social changes for men, such as the loss of interest in the traditional male 'breadwinner role' with increased divorce, rising unemployment and even 'men's liberation'. Perhaps most importantly is the direct and in - direct impacts of feminism, and men's various responses to feminism - on one hand, feminist critiques of dominant masculinity, male violence and patriarchal power; on the other hand, a

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<sup>1</sup> J. Hearn, *The Gender Oppression: Men, masculinity and the critique of Marxism*, Great Britain: Wheatsheaf Books Limited, 1987, p. 5

<sup>2</sup> Note 1, p. 6 : Kimmel, 1987

wide range of men's responses, ranging from outright hostility to sympathetic stances, in the form of men's anti - sexist groups and other such activities.<sup>3</sup>

According to David Buchbinder, it is no longer as easy as it once was to define heterosexual men as masculine and homosexual ones as, if not feminine or effeminate, then at least non - masculine. Machismo, which may be described as aggressive maleness or hyper-masculinity, is no longer the province only of the heterosexual. Many gay men in the 1980's adopted the macho look, and in addition, the public disclosure of their homosexuality by many gay men of various temperaments and appearance had tended to undermine the popular stereotype of the limp - wisted and lisping male homosexual.<sup>4</sup> "The rise of the 'new age' man has also jaded older, more traditional distinctions between what is considered manly or masculine and what is therefore unmanly, un-masculine"<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, it may be argued that the representations of men and masculinity have seen changes in 'everyday' culture. In the final decades of the twentieth century, feminism put 'masculinities' on the media agenda. From the beginning of the modern women's movement in the late 1960's, attention has been directed at male sexuality. The reasoning being that initially, men were the focus of attention because they were seen as the problem, the "...holders and guardians of the patriarchal power which kept women in a position of subordination"<sup>6</sup>. Barbara Creed argues that men are still seen as the problem, but the male gender role is now viewed as something open to change. Creed also suggests that the promotion of male interests in most areas of life has resulted in the ubiquitous glass ceiling and lack of equal rights for women in terms of salaries, recognition and most of all, opportunities.

The re - evaluation of masculinity came into its own through the influence of post - modern theory on cultural practice. The master discourse of 'manhood' could no longer be taken seriously according to Creed. Hollywood began to produce films in which the hero could only be seen as a parody of classic notions of masculinity in

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<sup>3</sup> Note 1, p. 8

<sup>4</sup> D. Buchbinder, *Masculinities and Identities*, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1994, p. 2

<sup>5</sup> Note 4, p. 3

<sup>6</sup> B. Creed, *Media Matrix: Sexing the New Reality*, North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2003, ch. 5, 'The Full Monty: Postmodern Men and the Media' pp. 78 - 96

response to this. Actors such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone played heroes who were so ‘pumped up’ that they could in no way be taken seriously. One Melbourne film critic went so far as to describe Arnie as looking like a condom stuffed with walnuts.<sup>7</sup>

Another way where it can be seen that representations of men and masculinity are changing in popular culture is through bodily objectification. This is one method in which the media have been eager to support role reversal for men. The concept of the male sex object is not new, in fact, the practice of men displaying their sexual and physical attributes has a long and somewhat venerable history suggests Creed. There is no doubt, however, that the sexual objectification of the male body reached great heights in the latter stage of the twentieth century within popular culture. More and more, men are becoming objects of position. Men are becoming the ‘object’ of the ‘gaze’, especially in association with advertising. In response to the concept of men being the object of the gaze and women owning this gaze, men’s bodies it may be argued, are becoming as commoditised as women’s have been throughout centuries. This gaze is also extended to other males, for example, men are often posed in sexually provocative and available positions in advertisements in male magazines, for instance, *Ralph Magazine*, where men are invited to be part of this gaze upon other men. Therefore it may be said that there are new relations of looking that challenge the conventional dynamics where men own the gaze and ‘others’ are the object of the gaze.

Andrew Ettinghausen is familiar Australian-wide not only through his performance on the rugby field but also through his appearances in the media as a model for advertisements for a variety of products, like men’s clothing. According to Buchbinder, he therefore runs the risk of becoming that anathematised thing, the male object of the gaze. Many of his appearances in television commercials evade the simple objectification of his body, and hence of his discursive position, by some of the strategies mentioned. However, a nude photograph of the famous Ettinghausen body invites his transformation into an eroticised object of the gaze. By allowing his body to be viewed as an object Ettinghausen was deemed, apparently, to have

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<sup>7</sup> Note 6

forfeited his claim to subjectivity, and hence control over his body. It became, as it were, public property. The Ettinghausen case throws suggestively into relief a number of the anxieties and concerns that beset men trying to live in accordance to the dominant model of masculinity, not the least of which is the positioning of the male as the object of the gaze which on one hand disciplines and supervises and on the other, may also articulate that of desire.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Ettinghausen's story also suggests that, according to Buchbinder, "...for all masculinity's pervasive tyranny over both men and women in the culture, its superiority and power rest on fragile, even treacherous, foundations."<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, not all agree on the desirability of women looking at men. While some argue that this change represents a genuine advance, others suggest that to turn men into sex objects is a setback for the debate surrounding equal opportunity. Consensus is impossible in this debate, but Creed says that at least the debate has made one definite gain, being that "...it has forced general recognition that women do, and should be allowed to, derive pleasure from looking, an activity that for too long has been the preserve of men"<sup>10</sup>. Creed continues by saying that the concept of 'masculinities' also reinforces the view that gender is a constructed category rather than a pre - given category. Sean Dixon also argues, like Creed, that, "...masculinity is not a fixed and unitary category.....Rather, like all identities masculinities are invented categories"<sup>11</sup>.

The re - emergence of women's movements, men's movements and the gay liberation movement has raised questions regarding dominant forms of masculinity and defined masculinity as a 'problem' in recent times, as mentioned previously. Economic changes within society have also been a major contributor in regards to destabilising and re - defining masculinity. Shifts within dominant forms of masculinity have also occurred due to these economic changes. The question may now be raised as to; has

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<sup>8</sup> The notion of the supervising and disciplining gaze is developed by Michael Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) in D. Buchbinder, *Masculinities and Identities*, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1994

<sup>9</sup> Note 4, p. 83

<sup>10</sup> Note 6, p. 84

<sup>11</sup> S. Nixon, 'Exhibiting Masculinity' in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, London: Sage, p. 301

hegemonic masculinity changed? In response, it may be argued that yes, hegemonic masculinity has in fact changed, especially in terms of ideals.

The development of new consumer markets, for example the expanding 'dare to care' market, has had a massive impact upon the changing representations of men and masculinity in popular culture. The 'new' men's magazines provide a good place to start looking at these new consumer markets and changing representations.

According to Tony Schirato and Susan Yell, there are several reasons for the appearance of these 'new' men's magazines on the stands. Firstly, the increasing public profile and acceptance of the men's movement, indicates that there is a discursive space in which 'men talking about men' can take place. Secondly, the expanding market recognises the demand by advertisers for a print media vehicle for marketing to men more broadly. Thirdly, men's increasing exposure to and wider acceptance of feminism has therefore challenged polarised notions surrounding gender identity.<sup>12</sup> These magazines provide a discursive site for the production and circulation of 'new' forms of masculine subjectivity says Schirato and Yell.

Some critics argue that while film, lifestyle magazines and popular culture are prepared to examine masculinity, they are not prepared to question male power itself. Creed suggests that this seems as true today as it was 70 years ago, judging by the surrealists discussions. The mainstream press and television programs hardly ever articulate awareness of the existence of a range of masculinities, instead promoting masculinity as a unitary category.<sup>13</sup> It is important to acknowledge that a range of masculinities exist within society when assessing the question as to whether representations of men and masculinity are changing in popular culture. The media rarely question the nature surrounding the masculinity displayed by male sporting heroes and politicians to name a few. "Masculinity is a transparent, singular, obvious quality".<sup>14</sup>

This view was confirmed in the late 1990's by cultural theorist Jackie Cook in her study associated with the representations depicted of male bodies in men's magazines,

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<sup>12</sup> T. Schirato & S. Yell, 'The 'new' men's magazines and the performance of masculinity', *Media International Australia*, no. 92, p. 81 - 90

<sup>13</sup> Note 6

<sup>14</sup> Note 6

for instance, in *Flex Magazine*, *Muscleman* and *Ralph*. She concluded that although more attention was given to health issues and the body, there appeared that there was no particular change in images of masculinity itself, “especially in relation to its ongoing social and cultural dominance.”<sup>15</sup>

Cook argues that although men may adopt provocative poses that were once the territory of the female model, women continue to be depicted as ornaments. Therefore it may be argued that yes, changes are associated with the representations of men and masculinity in popular culture, but these changes are perhaps not ‘real’ changes. Creed suggests that, “...unless men are prepared to question the nature of male power - its alignment with aggression and its subordination of women and children - it is difficult to envisage any lasting or worthwhile changes taking place”.<sup>16</sup>

It can be concluded that representations of men and masculinity in popular culture are changing due to the ‘new man’ phenomenon which may be described as a true creation of the media, although changes addressing the inner workings of the male are yet to be seen. Robert Bly believes that, “...men are still encouraged to look upwards and out rather than inwards and down, into themselves”.<sup>17</sup> It may also be seen that new relations exist in terms of looking that challenge the conventional dynamics where men own the gaze and ‘others’ are the object of the gaze. Cultural theorist L.H.M Ling warns of the problems which surface when the issue of masculine identity continues to be defined as ‘hyper - masculinity’.<sup>18</sup> “It is crucial that masculinity be re - thought particularly in relation to the new global media”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> J. Cook, ‘Men’s Magazines at the Millennium’ *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 14, p. 171 - 86

<sup>16</sup> Note 6

<sup>17</sup> R. Bly, *Iron John*, New York: Addison - Wesley, 1990

<sup>18</sup> L.H.M Ling, ‘Sex Machine: Global Hyper - masculinity and Images of the Asian Woman in Modernity’ *Positions*, vol. 7, no. 2, p. 277 - 306

<sup>19</sup> Note 6, ch.11

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