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Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* is a difficult read even for University students. Here, Claire Pollard simplifies the central idea of gender performativity which, she argues, is easy for A Level media students to grasp.

All of us are 'performative' at times in our own lives. Maybe your teacher spots you talking during some group work so you 'perform' good student – you know, when you seamlessly switch to talking to the subject at hand, lean in, point at the worksheet and furrow your brow. The model learner. An Oscar-worthy performance.

We all do it. We perform our identities and we adapt our performances for different situations. I know I perform mother, teacher, grown up and, when I'm out with my friends, revert back to being the cynical sarcastic teenager I was at school. None of these identities are the real me, but they all are.

Although we all perform our gender to a greater or lesser extent, the issue Butler identifies is that we don't have control over our gender performance. She argues that gender is a social construction: it is taught to us by external influences and it's ingrained at such a young age that we often mistake it as 'nature' rather than 'nurture'. In short, having male genitalia has no bearing on whether or not you like cars, nor does having a womb make you obsessed with unicorns and mermaids.

Gendering Children

Children are taught to perform their gender from early on so that they align themselves with certain tastes and behaviours befitting their gender category. This is never more noticeable to me than when ironing (on the rare occasions I perform 'good housewife') my children's t-shirts.

My son – 'Mummy's little monster' – has permission to be a scallywag, to be disruptive and chaotic – monstrous, even – and the main woman in his life will never disown him.

My daughter – 'Dancing with my friends makes the sun shine' – has a duty to be nothing more than agreeable, pleasant and pretty in order to make the world a better, sunnier place.

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If you shopped entirely at Primark or Mothercare (the worst places for these #everydaysexism clothing slogans) you'd be teaching girls to be passive, caring, responsible for the happiness of others, and boys to do what the hell they like because it's cute, attractive and roguish. Fast forward 30 years and you can possibly trace a line between these early messages and the startling number of women who suffer abusive relationships.

Multiple Genders

Gender Trouble was written in 1990 and at the time it was a criticism of the current wave of feminism that saw 'men' as the oppressive enemy to 'women'. Butler would argue that this particular feminist perspective perpetuates the idea that masculinity and femininity



Illustration by Tom Zaino

are binary states (at opposite ends of a scale) which reinforces ideas of patriarchal control. The gender 'trouble' she describes is when identities are formed that mess with the two binary states of femininity and masculinity.

When Butler wrote *Gender Trouble* in 1990, she used transvestism as an example of an identity which upsets the status quo of manly men and ladylike women. But in the 30 years since, society has come a long way and there is significantly more 'trouble' when it comes to binary notions of gender. The phrase 'non-binary', referring to someone who doesn't define themselves as either wholly male or female, is increasingly in common usage. The younger generation are gradually becoming more comfortable using the gender neutral pronoun 'they' to refer to people who do not identify as either 'he' or 'she' and increasingly media products made for the younger generation deal more openly with LGBTQ issues with more variety in the representations of multiple genders. In 2014, Facebook ended its binary gender categorisation and offered 71 different genders for users to choose from.

Representing Gender

Hopefully it is clear to see how the media products you have been studying contribute to the social construction of gender roles because most products do conform to stereotypes. Whilst there have been more progressive representations on some platforms (online, on demand services), the mass media still has a way to go. It's worth thinking (as always) about whose interests are served by perpetuating these roles. When females (and non-white, working class, LGBTQ+, disabled etc.) are presented as inferior, males (white, wealthy, heterosexual, able-bodied etc.) come out as superior (see Theory Drop: Hegemony MM65).

Of course the mainstream media relies on gender stereotypes for other reasons, mostly as a shortcut to meaning. Narratives (in film, TV, print, online) are easier for audiences to understand if the characters, subjects and storylines conform to a set of ideas that are already fixed in our heads from an early age. That's a whole load of telling and explaining that the magazine cover, advert, sitcom etc. doesn't have to do. And of course, audiences are more likely to be drawn to things that they recognise, that chime with their own reality, even though those 'realities' are – as Butler would argue – false, socially constructed and mediated (shaped through the media).

I still get excited when I see film that presents a range of non-stereotypical feminities (*Tuca and Bertie*, *Russian Doll* and *Killing Eve* have been my most recent faves) but the lazy stereotypes that are easy to spot in historical texts, (you'll have studied sexist Quality Street, Tide or Old Spice ads as part of your course) still prevail in modern media.

Have a look at the hashtag #everydaysexism on Twitter for numerous examples of how casually stereotypical messages about what it means to be male or female are spread and consider how far this influences how you perform your gender.



Dirt might not hurt, but gender stereotypes sure have the potential to

Get Involved

The Gender Equality Collective have just launched their #SmashingStereotypes production competition. They're looking for work in all forms that challenges gender stereotypes. Find out more at www.smashingstereotypes.co.uk/16-21

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from the MM vaults

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