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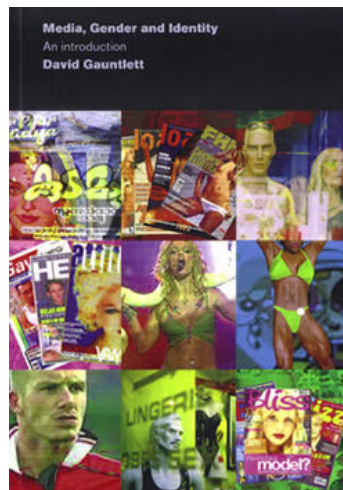
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We are pop pix

WHEN I CAME ACROSS David Gauntlett's theory.org.uk earlier this year, it was like being (very pleasantly) slapped across the face with a wet fish and told in no uncertain terms to lighten up. Media theory = v. relevant + fun. Oh yes, of course!

Outspoken, stylish and – above all – accessible, the site is a creative tour-de-force that exhibits both total enthusiasm and irreverence for all things pop culture. If you have yet to see the LEGO-man version of Michel Foucault or the Trading Cards featuring Tracy Emin and Girl Power, you really ought to visit the site post-haste.

In his latest publication, *Media, Gender and Identity – An Introduction*, Gauntlett has brought together many of the site's favourite themes in a handy paper-based format, suitable for dipping into on your way to either the cinema or lecture theatre. Looking mainly at television, movies, magazines and pop icons, the book traces the various

**'aiming arguments at moving targets'**http://www.hero.ac.uk/studying/archive/we_are_pop_pix2906.cfm

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theories that have attempted to pin down the effects of mass media on our actions and self-image. Rejecting 'patronising' notions of simple control, the author urges the reader to view the media-viewer relationship as a complex beast, and acknowledge its potential to inspire positive personal choice in the construction of our own identities.

Along the way, the reader is treated to some great entertainment, in the form of Gauntlett's irrepressible propensity for cheekiness and sarcasm. Applauding the creators of *Supergirl* for their attempt to even up the gender stakes, he adds that unfortunately they "forgot to make it a good film", a sentiment that will appeal to anyone who has seen it. Some paragraphs are shameless vehicles to set up his brilliant/awful gags:

It may be flawed, but Charlie's Angels seemed to be making some valiant attempts at role-reversal within the blockbuster mainstream. The final complaint from this film's detractors is usually that these supposedly independent women remain Charlie's women. But what does Charlie do? Apart from being rich, he is totally impotent. He redistributes wealth to three women in whom he has absolute trust. In other words, he's a Marxist and a feminist. There can be only one explanation: Charlie's Engels.

Aside from such outrageous puns, the section entitled 'What's Wrong With This Book' acknowledges that one may take issue with the optimism (in contrast to "sociological pessimism") displayed by his approach, but that he is not particularly interested in the notion that everyone is powerless at the hands of patriarchal, capitalist hegemony. He rebuffs accusations that to focus on personal choice is a middle-class debate, and champions the potential for everyone's liberation – regardless of social position – through a reflexive, imaginative media culture.

Gauntlett reserves his most potent bile for what he regards as the wrong-headedness of much psychology research in gender theory and media studies. A substantial chapter outlines the problem of quasi-scientific studies "reinforcing the status quo" of conservative attitudes to gender roles – in contrast to Gauntlett's belief that the media can help liberate us from traditional models. The sharpest expression of his views can be found on the website, where the trading card devoted to psychologists finds their special skill to be "arrogant ignorance of social factors". Even more painfully, the discipline of psychology "attracts thick people". Ouch!

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Gauntlett is kinder, but no less playful, with the three theorists that form the critical spine of his book. Chapters devoted to the ideas of Anthony Giddens, Judith Butler and Michel Foucault introduce the theories in plain – again, *accessible* – language, attempting to illuminate what he often regards as unnecessarily dark corners. His opinions on Judith Butler's awkward prose typify this approach:

...Butler is unlikely to win any awards for clarity of writing style. Her prose is unnecessarily dense and long-winded, and almost never fails to use jargon even where much more accessible vocabulary is available. Some people defend this, saying that academics should be allowed to develop complex terminology to express their sophisticated ideas – after all, nobody expects to read journals about rocket science and understand all of it straight away. However, although Butler's writing is like an explosion in a dictionary factory, if one takes time to dig through the rubble one finds that her ideas are actually quite straightforward.

Gauntlett appears to have made it his mission to bring the theory of popular culture to the widest possible audience, rightly reflecting the very nature of its subject matter. Occasionally, the chatty style becomes too loose for the subject matter: some sections could have done with another draft; but his infectious energy is palpable throughout the book, which in true pop style never lingers too long in any one place.

Additional material and extended discussions, which complement the book, can be found on the sister website. Gauntlett places strong emphasis on the possibilities of the internet, through which the author has conducted much of his research. And he practises what he preaches: Gauntlett's profusion of innovative web-based projects, and his evident enthusiasm for participating in internet discussions, represents a strong, practical commitment to the online community.

As he himself puts it himself, the practice of studying popular culture is to "aim arguments at moving targets" – and with this delightful and provocative text, he lands a number of sweet hits. Any passing psychologists are advised to watch out.

Charlie Peverett

From January 2003, David Gauntlett will be Professor of Media and Audiences

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at the Media School, University of Bournemouth. He currently teaches at the Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds.

'Media, Gender and Identity' is published by Routledge.

Relevant Information

Media, Gender and Identity

www.theoryhead.com/gender/

Theory.org.uk

theory.org.uk

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