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Tuchman, Daniels, and Benet: Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media

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Save for some predictably defensive network spokespersons, one would be hard pressed to find disagreement about the presentation of women by the mass media: in a word, it stinks. This book manages to express that contention, in tones ranging from disagreement about the presentation of women by media and their trivialization into sex objects, to American life" (p. 86). According to Gaye Tuchman (p. 17), the result of these two factors is that “the preschool girl, the school girl, the adolescent female, and the woman” learn from television, newspapers, and magazines.

Hearth and Home is an exploration and elaboration of this phenomenon and also something called the “reflection hypothesis.” Briefly, symbolic annihilation sums up both the underrepresentation of women in media and their trivialization into sex objects, “child-like adornments,” passive male adjuncts, and so on. The reflection hypothesis holds that, owing to television’s need to attract the largest possible audience and because of its corporate structure, its content reflects dominant social and cultural ideals and values (as opposed to “reality”). According to Gaye Tuchman (p. 17), the result of these two factors is that “women are not represented as integral to American life” (p. 86).

The section on women’s magazines points to a slightly different but unambiguous message: “women should strive to please others.” It begins with a very nicely written article by Marjorie Ferguson, who extracts this message by dissecting the “imagination and ideology” of the covers of several popular British women’s magazines. E. Barbara Phillips sees it in both Ms. and Family Circle, concluding that while Ms. is “liberal, not liberated,” neither is it “just another member of the Family Circle.” Carol Lopate’s innovative contribution looks at the coverage of Jackie Onassis in twelve different women’s magazines, and indirectly but convincingly reaches the same general conclusion.

The section on newspapers is not as tightly organized as the first two. Its chapters are a curious
blend of popular and academic writing, and often seem to deal more with newspapers than with the roles women play in, around, and for them. The section covers a wide—perhaps too wide—range of issues, starting with Gladys Engel Lang's discussions of the 'most admired woman' phenomenon and the treatment of women in the press corps. William Domhoff sees women's pages as a 'window on the ruling class' in America, with the attendant message that women are perceived merely as adjuncts to their powerful men. Harvey L. Molotch's delightful and chummy article speculates on how newspapers reveal power relationships between men and women, observes press emphasis on bra-burning, and makes understandable (but none the less contemptible) the premise that news is, by definition, male. The section closes with two articles on how journalists should treat women's movement news: Gaye Tuchman sees women's pages as a potential gold mine for spreading crucial information; Cynthia Fuchs Epstein fears that such placement will only continue the ghettoization of women's concerns.

The final section returns to television and its effects. Joyce N. Sprafkin and Robert M. Liebert present a lab test of children's sex-role identifications; contrary to network claims, children prefer to watch (and perhaps "model") characters of their own sex. Larry Gross and Suzanne Jeffries-Fox present some preliminary results of a longitudinal study of adolescents' sex-stereotypes: heavy viewers are somewhat more likely to hold sexist attitudes. Finally, James Benet poses but does not answer the unanswerable question, "Will Media Treatment of Women Improve?"

Thus, the message of television is that "women don't count for much." Magazines say that "women should strive to please others." And newspapers insist that women "aren't real news." Some of these articles cram a lot of data into a few pages (e.g., Molotch, Gerbner), some make a good attempt to deal with institutional processes (Cantor, Ferguson, Tuchman, Epstein), some deal with the more interpersonal implications of media imagery (Ferguson, Molotch). Some present strange theoretical justifications, or confuse content and effect (Schutze and Sprafkin, and the editors in certain introductory sections).

But, on the whole, the individual chapters in this book are fine, presenting either reasonably tight research or thoughtful and original commentary. The problem is their cumulative effect. Having seen spelled-out the abominable treatment of women in prime time, Saturday morning commercials, and PBS; in high-brow, low-brow, almost liberated, and far-from-liberal women's magazines; and in newspapers' "women's pages" and coverage of movement news, the reader is caught between awe at the consistency of the findings and boredom with the similarity of much of the research.

The book concludes with an annotated bibliography by Helen Franzwa of research articles, public interest reports, and popular articles concerning the portrayal of women on adult entertainment programs, public affairs, commercials, and children's shows. This impressive compendium points out most clearly what the field is missing: 71 of the papers listed refer to the presentation of women, while only 11 deal with the "impact" of that presentation—and some rather tenuously. Franzwa superbly ends her notes to her bibliography with a challenge to researchers and others (p. 274):

"Acknowledge that we now know just about all we need to know about the portrayal of women on television. Let us redirect research and action efforts to the impact of television's image on women and men, girls and boys."

Although Gross and Jeffries-Fox eloquently point out the problems such research faces (and almost make one frustrated just for the thinking about it), the challenge is still to be met.


Reviewed by Yeshayahu Nir
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The scientific and intellectual community has recently displayed renewed interest in photography, in general, and in photography as a primary source in sociocultural research, in particular. This book is a prime illustration of such a trend. The result of a series of extensive and interesting efforts in collection and selection, the book opens with portraits of Polish Jews, taken with early photographic techniques during the 1860s, and concludes with photographs taken from Jewish cinema films made in Poland during the 1930s. Between these two reference points there exists a plethora of material: private photographs taken from family albums, urban and rural landscapes, documentary and press photographs, and postcards and New Year's greeting cards, most of which were taken by Jewish photographers (including a few of the well-known extraordinary photographs of Roman Vishniak).

This is the most comprehensive attempt yet to describe—through photographs—the different aspects of Jewish communal life in Poland during the pre-World War II period. Its voluminous description and usage of the documentary dimension hidden in photographs of a conventional-commercial nature is highly interesting, as is the tendentious selection of photographs employed. In all these aspects, the importance of the book goes far beyond the specific subject of Polish Jewry.