Objectification: On the Difference between Sex and Sexism

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"Authored by a team of internationally respected scholars, whose research has shaped many of the current debates in gender and sexuality studies, *Objectification* is one of the first sustained studies to consider the subtle differences between sexualised representation and objectification arguing that, although these concepts may overlap, they are not the same thing. Addressing topics ranging from selfie culture to contemporary trans rights, *Objectification* makes a timely intervention into media and cultural studies. Written in an accessible style, which is free from academic jargon, this book will be important reading for both academic researchers and students who are new to the subject area."

Niall Richardson, Convenor of MA Gender and Media,
University of Sussex, UK

Objectification

This is a concise and accessible introduction into the concept of objectification, one of the most frequently recurring terms in both academic and media debates on the gendered politics of contemporary culture, and core to critiquing the social positions of sex and sexism.

Objectification is an issue of media representation and everyday experiences alike. Central to theories of film spectatorship, beauty fashion and sex, objectification is connected to the harassment and discrimination of women, to the sexualization of culture and the pressing presence of body norms within media. This concise guidebook traces the history of the term's emergence and its use in a variety of contexts such as debates about sexualization and the male gaze, and its mobilization in connection with the body, selfies and pornography, as well as in feminist activism.

It will be an essential introduction for undergraduate and postgraduate students in Gender Studies, Media Studies, Sociology, Cultural Studies or Visual Arts.

Susanna Paasonen is Professor of Media Studies at University of Turku, Finland. With an interest in studies of sexuality, networked media and affect, she is the Principal Investigator of both the Academy of Finland research project, "Sexuality and Play in Media Culture" and the Strategic Research Council funded consortium, "Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture". Examples of her publications include *Who's Laughing Now? Feminist Tactics in Social Media* (MITP, forthcoming, with Jenny Sundén), *NSFW: Sex, Humor and Risk in Social Media* (MITP, 2019, with Kylie Jarrett and Ben Light),

Many Splendored Things: Thinking Sex and Play (Goldsmiths Press, 2018) and *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (MITP, 2011).

Feona Attwood is the co-editor of *Sexualities* and founding co-editor of *Porn Studies*. Her research focuses on the changing place and significance of gender and sex and their representation in contemporary society. It examines the ways in which sexual practices and representations are caught up in wider debates around bodies, media and technologies, and the emerging centrality of new technologies in conceptions of gender and sexuality. She is the author of *Sex Media* (Wiley, 2018), co-editor of *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality* (Routledge, 2017) and *Controversial Images: Media Representations on the Edge* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and editor of *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture* (I.B. Tauris, 2009).

Alan McKee is an expert on entertainment and healthy sexual development. He holds an Australian Research Council Discovery grant entitled "Pornography's Effects on Audiences: Explaining Contradictory Research Data". He recently completed a Wellcome Grant entitled "Investigating Mediated Sex and Young People's Health and Well-being" and an ARC Linkage grant with True (previously Family Planning Queensland) to investigate the use of vulgar comedy to provide information about healthy sexual development to young men. He was co-editor of the *Girlfriend Guide to Life* and co-author of *Pornography: Structures Agency and Performance* (Polity, 2015). He has published on healthy sexual development, and entertainment education for healthy sexuality in journals, including the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, the *International Journal of Sexual Health*, the *Journal of Sex Research* and *Sex Education*.

John Mercer is Professor of Gender and Sexuality at Birmingham City University. He is the Principal Investigator (with Clarissa Smith) of the "Masculinity, Sex and Popular Culture" AHRC research network and is co-editor with Clarissa Smith of the Routledge book series of the same name. He is the author of *Gay Porn: Representations of Masculinity and Sexuality* (I.B. Tauris, 2017), *Rock Hudson* (BFI Publishing, 2015) and of *Melodrama: Genre*

Style Sensibility (with Martin Shingler) (Columbia University Press, 2004). He is co-editor of the *Journal of Gender Studies, Porn Studies*, and editorial board member of *Sexualities* and *Celebrity Studies*. He has written about film and television genres, celebrity and stardom, the pornography debate, the sexualization of contemporary media culture and contemporary masculinity. His research interests concern the politics of representation, in particular sexual representation, the connections between gay pornography and the making of a gay identity, the social and cultural construction of masculinities, performances of gender in the media and the wider culture, and melodrama, emotion and affect in the media and their gendered modes of address.

Clarissa Smith is Professor in the Media School at Northumbria University. A founding co-editor of *Porn Studies*, Clarissa's research is focused on representations of sex and sexuality, their production and consumption. Publications include numerous articles and chapters exploring the specificities of pornographic imagery, forms of stardom, production and regulation. She is interested in media consumption and how different audiences engage with and make sense of popular representations; she is also engaged in research to explore young people's practices of digital self-representation and participation.

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Objectification

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1 What counts as objectification?

Kim Kardashian-West is currently one of the most famous women on the planet, and one of the things she is most famous for is objectifying herself (see Figure 1.1). Kardashian has created a massive public archive of images documenting almost every aspect of her everyday life, from professionally-taken glamour shots to seemingly casual selfies shared with some 153 million followers on her Instagram account. Many of those images show off her body, revealing its contours in little or no clothing and modelled in sexy poses. Kardashian's rise to fame was fuelled by the reality TV show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (2007–) focusing on her family after a sex tape, released by her then boyfriend in 2007, became the most watched adult video of all time, gaining 150 million online views during its first decade alone. Critics abound. "She has successfully reduced herself to one thing … a vapid sex object" (Khona 2016: np), they say, presenting to the world her "disempowered 'I am a sex object' pose" (Mollard, 2016: np). Critics ask her how she feels about "objectifying herself with selfies" (McGahan, 2015: np).

If we take a moment to pause and think about it, the idea of "objectifying yourself" is a difficult one. Is it, in fact, possible to objectify yourself? As the opposite of subjects, objects do not have agency or the ability to control how they are seen by people – or, in fact, how they are treated by them. Surely the very fact of actively presenting oneself and offering oneself to be seen in a certain way must mean, from a logical standpoint, that you are not an object? Kim Kardashian is very rich, and influential through her public visibility. She runs several companies and has a great deal of control over her own life and those of other people. Is that what being an
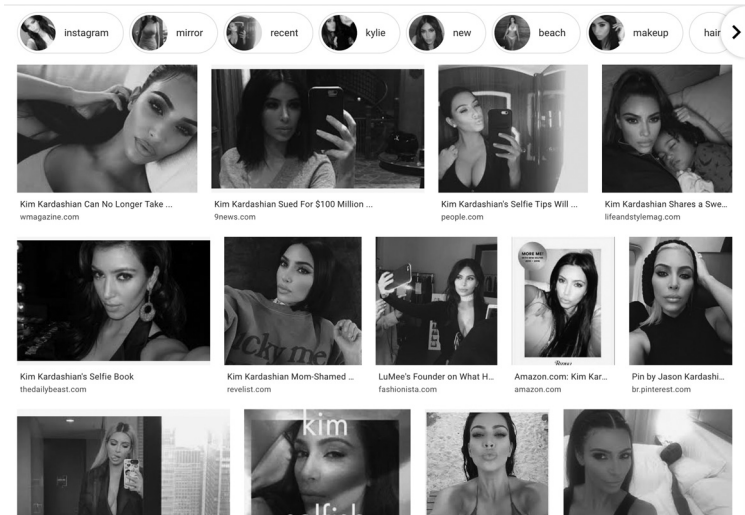
Figure 1.1 Google image search for "Kim Kardashian selfie", March 2020

object means? The fact that Kardashian's celebrity career can be said to result from her objectifying herself suggests how complicated this broadly used notion is, as well as how important it is to understand what it means, how it is used and where its different uses stem from. For what does objectification actually mean?

The concept of objectification has passed out of the realm of academic discussion and feminist politics, and into popular public debate. It is more than a common word used to voice concerns about gender oppression in twenty-first century societies, particularly in connection to the ways that women are represented, and represent themselves, across media. The term bundles together issues about appearance, beauty, bodies, sex and social power. Objectification is one of the most frequently used terms in both academic and media debates on the gendered politics of contemporary culture, and ubiquitous as such. Critiques of objectification range from debates on gendered harassment and discrimination to ones focusing on the sexualization of culture and the pressing presence of gendered body norms within media. Objectification is an issue of media representation and everyday experiences alike, and it cuts through feminist

inquiry on an international scale as shorthand for sexist practices of representation and gender-based inequalities. The concept has been used to underpin a number of activist initiatives, from the "we are not things" posters held by #MeToo campaigners to the "National Center on Sexual Exploitation" – a conservative US group – whose complaints about the covers of the *Cosmopolitan* magazine objectifying and demeaning women got the Walmart chain to remove it from checkout counters in 2018. Despite these abundant uses of the term, there is nevertheless surprisingly little consensus as to what qualifies as, or what is meant by, objectification; or how it connects to, and differs from other critical concepts such as sexism or sexualization used for tackling similar concerns. This obscurity is partly due to how the concept is most recurrently used in the context of sexual representation, and as synonymous with the sexual objectification of women.

Setting out to untangle all this, our book uncovers the applications of objectification in feminist scholarship and activism, from 1970s theories of film spectatorship and gendered ways of seeing to anti-pornography discourses and to critiques of body and beauty norms, as carried out under the rubric of sexualization. We are a group of male and female researchers trained in film studies, cultural studies and media studies, queer and straight, working in Australia, Finland and the United Kingdom. We are all strongly committed to feminist approaches to understanding the media and we want to think through the opportunities and the risks that are involved in making critiques of objectification a central part of our attempts to challenge sexist ideologies that devalue and disempower women. We ask, what is at stake in debates connected to objectification, what the possibilities and limitations of the notion are and what other analytical routes are on offer for understanding gender, sexuality and the media. In doing so, we make an argument for the continuing necessity of critiquing *sexism*, namely discrimination or bias based on someone's perceived gender, while simultaneously insisting on the importance of sexual agency and the value of sexual representation – not least to those in disenfranchised social positions. In other words, we argue for distinguishing between critiques of sex in the media and those addressing sexism as a social practice. This connects to our further argument on the centrality of sexual agency and sexual subjectivity – that of women, men and people of other genders – as it connects to practices

of representation, self-fashioning and relating to other people: it is our concern that this is something that broad critiques of objectification fail to accommodate.

Mapping objectification

We start by considering the ways in which objectification has been discussed in academic writing. Across its different applications in film and media studies, gender studies, sociology, law, and beyond, objectification means treating and dehumanizing a person as a thing, instrument or object. However, this shared starting point masks a range of complex differences in the way that the term has been employed in diverse contexts, from conditions of slavery to the glossy imageries of advertising – phenomena that are strikingly distinct, involve incompatible relations and dynamics of power and yield drastically different social effects. In her analysis of the understanding of objectification within feminist inquiry, philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1995: 256–7) defines it as "a question of treating one thing as another. One is treating *as an object* what is really not an object, what is in fact, a human being". Nussbaum (1995: 251) argues that objectification remains a slippery concept that can be interpreted in at least seven different ways, "none of which implies any of the others":

1   *Instrumentality*: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of their other purposes.
2   *Denial of autonomy*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
3   *Inertness*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.
4   *Fungibility:* The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.
5   *Violability:* The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
6   *Ownership:* The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.

7 *Denial of subjectivity:* The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account (Nussbaum, 1995: 257).

As Nussbaum points out, just because something is an object does not mean it is seen as worthless or disposable. Some objects – such as paper coffee cups – are, but others – such as art and antiques – definitely are not. So even from the start it is not clear exactly what "objecthood" means. On the one hand, Nussbaum identifies all seven forms of objectification as morally objectionable in blurring and violating the boundaries of objects and human subjects. On the other hand, none of this is absolute, given the ambiguities involved: a child, for example, is not granted full individual autonomy, but this is not necessarily morally problematic, given children's cognitive and affective limitations of understanding and independently acting out in the world. We might momentarily instrumentalize an intimate partner, relying on them to provide something for us. They may never even know that this has happened, so that it has no impact on their lives. Alternatively, they may not mind doing us a favour. They may be pleased to be of help, or they may like us to eye them as desirable sexual objects.

Importantly – objectification is not automatically about gender, even though debates on objectification do almost exclusively cluster on issues having to do with the representation of women. Both men and women can be objectified and sexualized, across all of the domains noted above. For example, it makes sense to say that people of all genders are objectified in capitalist, neo-liberal societies, even though they are not similarly objectified in different, differently sexist and patriarchal cultures. In referring to the process of rendering people into things, the notion of objectification is akin to Georg Lukács's concern with *reification* as a process where people become thing-like in their behaviours and functions while man-made objects gain certain liveness within commodity fetishism (see Pitkin, 1987). For Lukács, building on Karl Marx, reification was a product of capitalism and hence entailed a broad logic of instrumentality and alienation that did not follow the divides of gender. It is therefore possible to critique the logics of neoliberalism as a dominant economical and ideological social framework within which the value of individuals is seen as dependent on their individual productivity – or, as in the case of

Kim Kardashian, on their sheer visibility. As individuals compete on free markets, they come to understand and to craft themselves into commodities in order to find employment as well as to be valued in their other social relations and attachments. In this framework, neoliberalism is seen as that which makes people make themselves into objects while also commodifying intimate relations as exchanges of human goods and services. Kardashian's self-branding exercises, both individually and together with her similarly famous partner, the rapper Kanye West, are symbolic of success within such markets of neoliberalism.

We can even argue that the very act of representing somebody, in any way – photographing them, say, or recording their voice or shooting their movements on video – also objectifies them in the sense of rendering a person subject of consumption through visual or auditory means. Images of their bodies can be reproduced, contemplated, edited or watched in slow motion; their voice can be replayed, or broken down into sounds to be recomposed at will; their representations can be used for promotional or advertising purposes. This does not mean that the bodies represented are automatically or causally rendered as objects of sexual availability, or that all gendered practices of representation involve the making of sexual objects. Things are more complex.

Gendered objects

We are interested in why sexuality – and heterosexuality in particular – has remained so key to debates on objectification to the point of this being the primary framework within which the term is deployed. Any kind of a person, or animal, can be objectified in the sense of being stripped of autonomy and volition, and being treated as an instrument for the gain of others. The ownership of people as slaves in the United States relied on the objectification of Africans and African-Americans as property rather than people, and as instruments whose lives could be terminated at their owners' will. Such dehumanization is an ultimate reminder of what objectification can mean in terms of denying autonomy and agency to human beings. In this book, we are primarily concerned about objectification as it is used in feminist critique, this being the primary, predominant framework within which the term continues to be deployed.

Ann Cahill argues traces feminist conceptualizations of objectification back to the work of Simone de Beauvoir in the 1940s, who saw the identification of women with the passive materiality of their bodies – their apparent *thingness* – as a primary tactic of gender-based othering. Sexuality, she points out, has since been understood as being key to the formation of women as objects:

> Much of feminist theory has been committed to the claim that the sexual objectification of women is harmful, degrading, and oppressive. To be viewed as a sex object is to be regarded as less than a full human person, to be debased and reduced to mere flesh. The male gaze – which is male primarily in its effect, not necessarily in its origin, in that women can also adopt it – defines and constrains women, assesses their beauty, and in doing so dehumanizes them.
>
> (Cahill, 2011: 84)

What is mainly meant with objectification in feminist critiques is the reduction of women to their physical attributes and heterosexual attractiveness in ways that mitigate their individuality and agency. This is a very real kind of objectification, yet one that hardly compares with the conditions and practices of slavery. Despite the dramatic disparity between these two examples, both connections and equations between the two were drawn in 1970s and 1980s radical feminist writings critiquing women's position within patriarchy and using pornography as key example of the systematic oppression and the enslavement of women. Nussbaum (1995: 249) associates the overall popularity and resonance of the notion of objectification in discussions of gender relations with the work of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine A. MacKinnon built on a broader conceptualization of heterosexuality as entailing the sexual objectification, commodification, and the consequent dehumanization of women by men. This meant understanding pornography as a means of silencing women by making them into things, objects and commodities (Langton, 2009: 10): MacKinnon (1996: 33–7) saw pornographic representations of non-consent as comparable to images of lynchings and genocide as violent expressions of hate. A binary gender divide premised on heterosexual power dynamics cuts through much of this feminist work. As we show in Chapter 3,

within this "body politics", sexuality becomes the terrain of power and domination while objectification becomes a process of world-building that "creates reality and types of beings" (Cahill, 2011: 4).

Feminist critiques of objectification have not then been simply concerned with gender stereotypes, or the ways in which men and women are expected to perform different roles in patriarchal societies. Rather, they have attempted to show the processes by which women are cast as lesser to and as subservient to men, as well as how the facts of being represented – depicted, acknowledged and spoken for – are distributed differently for men and for women, giving further rise to gender asymmetry. Much of this has to do with the dynamics of heterosexuality and cultural representations thereof.

As Nussbaum's work shows us, there is however no necessary link between objectification and sexual representation. Research across academic disciplines has addressed a number of contexts in which people are treated as objects in ways that do not involve being sexualized – as in the case of trafficked farm labour, for example. Conversely, people can be and perform sexinesss and contribute to sexual representations without losing their agency – or, at least, we argue this to be the case. Sexism, we further argue, is a different concern from both sexual depiction and sexiness, despite the ease with which these notions are routinely conflated. Sexism is an operation of power that crafts out, and supports unequal social relations by allocating bodies coded as feminine – independent of whether these bodies are cis- or transgender, considered genetically or anatomically female or not – with particular forms of agency, vulnerability and assumed sexual availability. People can be represented as sexually attractive or as engaged in sexual activities, and they can represent themselves as sexually attractive and as engaged in sexual activities without becoming someone else's tools lacking in agency, becoming interchangeable, or being owned. Such depictions are not reducible to any single set of meanings, nor are they simply similar to one another.

Yet the fact remains that different groups of people are assigned different kinds of roles in practices of representation, these roles building on, possibly further fuelling or challenging social hierarchies and relations of power, as drawn along the axes of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, size, and a plethora of other differences. Different people then fail to be similarly treated: some are seen as being more important and valuable than others, and such differences need to be

accounted. The value and importance allocated to people within a society then reverberates with how these people are depicted in the media and how their voices become heard within it. This is key to the politics of cultural representation as it intersects with social power, a concern and a research tradition discussed further in Chapter 2.

Collapsing sex and sexism

As we argue in this book, much contemporary feminist debate collapses together the concepts of sexism and objectification as though these terms were synonyms. The notion of objectification holds perennial appeal as shorthand for gender-based inequalities. There is often seeming immediacy, or acuteness, to critiques of objectification as a means of intervening in public debate: the notion speaks to transformations that we can see happening in the public sphere. This book, again, suggests that one pauses before launching into diagnoses of objectification, and considers instead what the point of the intended analysis and critique is and what one in fact wants to describe with the concept. Is one critiquing the operations of sexism, or acts of sex displayed in the media? Is the issue one of nudity, of commodification and consumer culture or gender-based violence – or all of the above? In particular, this book argues against the equation of sexual representation with sexism.

Western cultures are increasingly sexually permissive, even progressive. Churches have less control over sexual expression than was the case in the past. Moralistic demands that women cover up their bodies are no longer as powerful as was the case in the past. In this context sexual content is increasingly visible, public and diverse. The landscape of mediated sex has drastically expanded and shifted from print, television and film to social media platforms and other networked exchanges hosting commercially produced content, DIY efforts and myriad combinations thereof – from queer tube celebrities to sex education resources and nude selfies. Pornography, a perennial concern in debates on objectification, is available in broader and more diverse supply than ever, further accelerating concerns about the current cultural moment, its impacts on contemporary sexual mores and those to follow (see Attwood, 2017). The ways in which sex and sexuality are discussed and represented are more diverse than ever to date, encompassing not only lesbian and gay perspectives but equally those of asexual, transgender, nonbinary and gender nonconforming people.

Meanwhile, feminist critiques of objectification have responded to such changes primarily by focusing on the commercial uses of female bodies in the media. In their analysis of advertisements that sexually objectify women, Amanda Zimmerman and John Dahlberg (2008), for example, motivate their study through the increased presence of sexual media content:

> For women born in the early 1980s, sex in the media has been a constant companion. Sex is everywhere, on prime-time television programs, movies, and music videos. It is rare to view an hour of television and not see a suggestively dressed or undressed female, whether in a program or a commercial. Sexual imagery appears in magazine articles and advertisements. A recent issue of *Cosmopolitan* might contain hundreds of half-naked women, stories of sexual mishaps, and even instructions for the ancient art of Kama Sutra.
>
> (Zimmerman and Dahlberg, 2008: 71)

This argument is not an isolated one as similar concerns over the increased sexualization and pornification of culture have been vocally posed since the early 2000s. Pamela Paul's book *Pornified: How Pornography is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships and Our Families* (Paul, 2005) and Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (Levy, 2005) launched the language of pornification into mainstream public debate and tied concerns about objectification to the notion of sexual liberation and the gendered fallacies it entails. Looking more carefully at Zimmerman and Dahlberg's account of sexual objectification, they conflate sexual content with female nudity as though they are automatically the same thing, without paying attention to contextual differences between, say, images or sex tips in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, the *Kamasutra* as an ancient erotic Hindu text, sexy poses taken in music videos and sex scenes featured in films non-pornographic enough to be shown on prime-time television. The authors equate sexism with portrayals focusing on women's bodies – all kinds of bodies – in ways that leave little room to think about sexism apart from sexual depiction or objectification (Zimmerman and Dahlberg, 2008: 72, 74).

We disagree with this position. We note that despite the accumulation of diagnoses, according to which contemporary culture is increasingly preoccupied with the visual objectification of women, there is actually less sexism in the media now than there was in previous decades. In other words, while there may be more *sexual* depiction than ever, *sexist* representations have grown less socially acceptable, and it is productive to ply these two concepts apart.

Take – an obvious and egregious media historical example – the highly popular British television comedy series, *The Benny Hill Show* (1955–1989) (see Figure 1.2). At least since the 1970s, each episode of this worldwide success ended in a scene of a chase where the main character was chased by people, chased some people himself, or both. As much of the show's comedy was based on instances of heterosexual titillation and female lack of dress, these people were notably often semi-naked women, sometimes in their underwear or strategically clutching a garment to cover their nudity. While the amusement of this recurrent scene might not seem obvious to the contemporary viewer, it

Figure 1.2 In a typical *Benny Hill* sketch, a nurse in an old folks' home plays strip poker with an old man. When she gets down to her bra and panties, the excitement of seeing of her cleavage kills the old man she's playing with

carried well into the series' demise. In another British example, since the 1970s, tabloid newspaper *The Sun* was renowned for its Page 3 Girls – young women who smiled invitingly while baring their breasts in the nation's favourite "newspaper" – the feature gradually disappeared in the course of the 2010s. In 1983 – the heyday of the "Page 3 Stunner" – *The Sun* introduced a counter counting down the days until Samantha Fox (its most famous model) turned sixteen years old and the paper could legally publish topless images of her. Such examples show that previous decades were not spaces of innocent purity with regards to their representations of women.

Further, even when previous decades were less overtly sexual in their representation of women, they were massively more sexist. It is in fact noteworthy that, in thinking of examples of sexist representation, it is the media of yesteryear that first comes to mind. Take the case of a single genre – police shows. The genre emerged in its modern form in the radio show *Dragnet* (1949–1957) and its television version (1951–1959, 1967–1970). Over the course of its television life, *Dragnet* had six lead characters – all male. Of course, women *appeared* – in roles as secretaries, wives and mothers, and particularly as victims of crime. Women were not police: in a sexist culture, entertainment reflected that sexism. The cop show flourished in succeeding decades, with forty-two new programmes debuting in America in the 1970s (Butler, 2004: 1870). It wasn't until *Police Woman* (1974) that a female police officer headlined a TV show. The lead character, Sergeant "Pepper" Anderson (Angie Dickinson) worked in an undercover unit, and in the course of the show went undercover as a model, an airline stewardess, a sex worker (or, as used in the show, "prostitute"), and a go-go dancer among other roles. It is interesting that the next major crime show with female leads, *Charlie's Angels* (1976–1981), also featured the heroines regularly going undercover as models, night club dancers, roller-skating waitresses, and sex workers (or, as used in the show, "streetwalkers") (see Figure 1.3). As *Charlie's Angels* ended, *Cagney and Lacey* became, in 1982, the first cop show to feature female cops who were not regularly going undercover, but were just getting on with being cops – and even here the role of Cagney was recast after the first season because, as a CBS executive put it in an interview with *TV Guide*: "The American public doesn't respond to the bra burners, the fighters, the women who insist on calling manhole covers peoplehole covers … We perceived them [actors Tyne Daly and Meg Foster] as dykes" (Butler, 2004: 1780).

Figure 1.3 A female TV detective in 1977: Cheryl Ladd in *Charlie's Angels*
episode "Pretty Angels All in a Row"

In our current television ecology dozens of crime shows have
female leads – *The Bridge, Line of Duty, The Killing, No Offence,
Broadchurch, The Fall, Elementary, The Closer, Cold Case, Bones,
Without A Trace, Law and Order: SVU*, and so on. These char-
acters are not required to go undercover as sex workers, they get
the job done and are not simply recast because producers fear
audiences perceive some of them as dykes. In this context it is
sobering to remember how far we have come in terms of entertain-
ment. For twenty-five years women watching television did not see
a single female lead in a cop show. After that, when they did see
women, they were going undercover in traditionally feminine occu-
pations (in neither *Police Woman* nor *Charlie's Angels* did a woman
go undercover as a surgeon or a politician, for example). It took
thirty years for female viewers to see a female cop leading a show
who was not performing stereotyped feminine roles as part of her
duties. That is a massively sexist entertainment culture.

We can trace similar changes in other genres, as the roles played by women have expanded and become more authoritative and less reliant on being wives, mothers and secretaries. Media representations of women in the twenty-first century are less sexist than fifty years ago, and this correlates with the increased presence of women in positions of political, corporate, cultural and financial leadership. This is not to say that the current world of entertainment is perfect – that is far from the case. Representations of able-bodied young bodies displayed for the visual gratification of viewers remain standard and ubiquitous. But in the media now these bodies are not exclusively female or feminine, nor are they merely catering to the visual pleasures of male heterosexual audiences.

In short, the current range of sexual representation in Western cultures is not correlated with increasing sexism in those cultures. In terms of gender representation and attitudes towards women, we believe that anybody who has any familiarity with cultural history would agree that society and, by extension, the media is less sexist now than was the case in previous decades. Even if, in cop shows, women were not being shown topless as such, they could only be secretaries, aspiring at most to make cups of tea for the men who actually went out and did the work (when *Charlie's Angel* Sabrina left the show at the start of season five it was because she was going to get married and start a family; there was no suggestion that a woman could get married, start a family, and continue solving crimes). There are many forms of sexism that remain unconnected to the sexualization of female bodies – and we should avoid romanticizing the past, or insisting that the world was absolutely less sexist until the broad availability of online pornography, for example.

Viewing historical examples of such sexist representation in contemporary media studies classrooms usually results in confusion, bemusement and dismay. They simply come across as incompatible with contemporary conventions of representation, and bizarre in the gendered and sexual dynamics that they depict. While relatively recent historically, they speak of an alien cultural context where the lines of acceptability in terms of representation, humour, gendered agency and heterosexual titillation were differently drawn. They further speak of contexts where explicit sexism was not only acceptable it was taken for granted, and even expected in popular

media representation, and their existence certainly challenges arguments that identify sexually suggestive poses or innuendos as a development specific to the recent emergence of "porn culture" (e.g. Sarracino and Scott, 2008: x). As there is no evidence of media culture having grown ever more sexist with the abundant supply of sexual content, this book argues that it is imperative to distinguish between sex and sexism, sexual representation and sexist representation, if we are to understand the different meanings, roles and values of the depictions in question.

Things to come

This book explores the risks of conflating sexuality and sexism, objectification and sexism, or objectification and sexual depiction. The following chapters take you through the history of debates about objectification and gendered representation from the 1970s to the current day, analysing the stakes involved in and for feminist theory and activism, and sets out to find alternative ways of thinking about sexism, representation and sexual agency. All this necessitates going back to what are by now classics texts on the politics of vision and object-making before moving onto analyses of contemporary media culture.

Chapter 2 starts our argument by tracing the importance of John Berger's (1972) book, *Ways of Seeing*, and Laura Mulvey's (1975) classic essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", for their theorizations of the dynamics of gendered forms of representation, looking and spectatorship. Despite being published in the 1970s, both bodies of work, and that of Mulvey's in particular, remain widely cited and are still used to provide a framework for understanding the gender dynamics of vision today, foregrounding gendered social power and control in practices of seeing and being seen. Considering the multiple legacies and uses of Mulvey's essay, the chapter also asks how it has been challenged and how it connects to later studies investigating the role of representation in the construction of gender roles and the ways that men and women are differently valued. This contextual chapter then presents key questions in studies of looking, gender and power.

Chapter 3 asks why, out of all the different aspects of objectification that we might consider, sexuality has been, and remains, so central to feminist debates on this topic. We explain this by looking at the work

of radical feminist writers of the 1970s and 1980s, exploring how this work drew attention to the ideologies of gender in society and which created a series of binaries whereby male/female is mapped onto a series of other values – active/passive, strong/weak, subject/object. This framework continues to hold power in ways of thinking about and acting against gender oppression, yet the binary model poses severe limitations to how gender can be thought of and, consequently, in how objects of critique are identified and approached. We ask how this model has fed into ways of understanding, valuing and denouncing sexual practices, as well as how it relates to changing social structures, particularly the challenge of intersectional thinking about power and transgender identity.

In Chapter 4, having established why representations of sex have become the key way of thinking about objectification and the symbolic role that pornography has occupied in these debates, we move to thinking about sexual subjectivity in connection with sex work. For those feminist activists and researchers seeing pornography as the most powerful form of objectification, the agency of women producing it has come across as limited, or even illusory. Resisting a binary between sexual depiction as objectification and sexual subjectivity, we address the pornographic work of Jiz Lee, arguing that it undermines any conflation of sexual performance with a position of powerlessness. In contrast, such claims can be seen as dependent on, and as reinvigorating, sexist tropes of appropriate femininities. In doing so, the chapter teases out complexities and nuances connected to the work of commercial sex and the sexual agency enacted within it.

In Chapter 5, we ask how objectification can be measured in academic research and how the concept intersects with concerns over sexualization in the field of social psychology in particular – how, in fact, objectification as a concern about body image shifted to, and merged with, concerns over sexualization. In doing so, we shift our focus to methodological choices and challenges involved in identifying objectification in pornographic representations, and beyond. The chapter shows the debt of objectification theories to models of media effects, asking how perceptions of negative impact build on, and tap into, norms concerning what is seen as healthy or normal sexuality, as the discussion extends from investigations of pornography as a highly contested terrain of cultural production and consumption to sexually suggestive forms of popular media.

Having explored how the wide variety of debates about sexism and representation have often been reduced down to concern about pornography, in Chapter 6, we show how concern has, once more, extended to representations of women in a range of popular media genres. The concepts of "pornification" and "sexualization" have been used to diagnose broad cultural transformations within which the objectification of women occurs. Our interests lie in how a sexualization debate has emerged with an established rhetoric, range of figures, narratives and particular concerns, and how it maps to the notion of objectification. By addressing academic studies and government reports alike, we inquire after the gendered and sexual norms that they communicate while also focusing on the difficulties of evaluating or defining sexual agency. Concluding with the example of pop star Ariana Grande's uses of "sexiness" in her performance style, we argue for complicating over-arching interpretations of what such representations may mean or achieve.

In Chapter 7, we explore alternative ways of approaching and addressing gendered modes of seeing and being seen, in tandem with looking for alternative terminology to that of the male gaze in the context of contemporary popular media culture. Taking cue from intersectional critique, the chapter examines music videos by black female artists, showing how their work complicates and disturbs the model of the male gaze (as introduced in Chapter 2), pushing for more diverse and contextual conceptualizations of sexual representation instead. By addressing the reality TV show, *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the 2015 independent film on black transgender sex workers, *Tangerine*, we further point out the shortcomings of theories of objectification and sexualization in being too totalizing and bound up with considerations of binary gender difference, and hence lacking in crucial contextual nuance of the kind necessary for exploring the intersections of identity categories such as race, sexuality or class with that of gender.

Lastly, as a means of drawing these strands of discussion together, Chapter 8 proposes ways forward for research that are not limited to binary divisions between objects and subjects in future considerations of gender, media, sexuality and agency. By focusing on debates and research on selfie culture, we argue for seeing humans simultaneously as subjects and objects, as well as for shifting the emphasis of feminist critique to sexism over sexual representation. All in all, this

book argues for an understanding of subjectivity and objecthood as coexistent, rather than as mutually exclusive. As material, embodied beings, we are always already objects, as well as subjects acting out in the world and establishing connections with other bodies within it – a point elaborated in the concluding chapter in particular. There is a plethora of ways to represent, and self-represent such bodies, for one's own pleasure as well as for the pleasure of others. Within these, it is possible to be represented as an object of visual pleasure as a flirtatious invitation, as an offer of services, or as a way of perceiving oneself from a distance: none of this implies or necessitates an annulment of agency or subjectivity. Furthermore, none of these practices need be confined in a heteronormative framework premised on binary gender.

As feminist authors, we have spent our careers examining the ways in which gender identities, relations and oppression are supported and made meaningful in media practices. From this perspective we are concerned that the ways in which the concept of "objectification" gets used in both public debates and academic inquiry fails to do the crucial work in prying apart sexism from sexual representation and, consequently, fails in examining the crucial issues concerning social power that are at play. We want to offer what we see as some more useful ways to think about and challenge sexism in popular media and in our societies. We hope that this book will be useful in helping you think about these issues, too.

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