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Gender and Media in the Post and Cold War Era

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PANEL REVIEW BY JULIA WRIGHT

# Gender and Media

## IN THE POST AND COLD WAR ERA

IN THE PANEL ENTITLED, "Gender & Media in the Post and Cold War Era," four presentations examined the construction of femininity across popular media such as film, teen magazines, high fashion, and news coverage. This panel was moderated by Kristen Hatch, Professor of Film and Media Studies at UC Irvine, and featured presentations by: Molly Jessup, Department of History at Syracuse University; Diana Belscamper, Department of History in Modern Studies at University of Wisconsin; Dawn Fratini, Department of Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA; and Aubri McDonald, Department of Criminology, Law, and Justice at University of Illinois. While the

presentations offered diverse examples, each speaker stressed the importance of historical context and identity politics in their analyses. Panel mediator Hatch further proposed that in each case, presenters revealed the intersectional nature of media discourse: addressing media representations of femininity and demonstrating how such representations address multiple social concerns related to women.

### TEENAGE TERRORISM

In "Girls Gone Wild? Respectability, Political Stability, and Gender," Molly Jessup examined media representations of deviant female behavior and its relation to Cold War conformity.

Jessup prefaced her argument by stating that in historical moments of political instability, women's behaviors are used to reinforce desirable social attributes in men. She focused on two films in particular: the teen exploitation movie *The Violent Years* (1956) and the educational film *Are You Popular?* (1947).

*The Violent Years* documents the misadventures of Paula Perkins, a juvenile delinquent whose uncontrolled sexuality leads her to commit several crimes (such as rape and armed robbery) with her female posse. Paula's criminality is the direct consequence of her sexual deviancy. *Are You Popular?* educates its audience through an expository comparison of a



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bad girl named Ginny (who sits in parked cars with many different boys) and the “popular” Caroline (who admirably clings to the door handle of her date’s car). Caroline’s sexual vigilance and concern for her reputation makes her male companions feel special, whereas Ginny’s (presumed) promiscuity is a turnoff to men. Both films presented the consequences of female sexuality, which were targeted at teen audiences. Jessup argued that in both films, women who exhibited any sexual interests were represented as being at greater risk of committing anti-social and even criminal behavior. Women who demonstrated sexual restraint made for good girls, upstanding citizens, and suitable mates for men.

### CONSPICUOUS CITIZENSHIP



Like Jessup, Diana Belscamper’s presentation entitled, “Good Girls and Better Consumers: Teen Magazines and Teenage Consumers in the Cold War Era” found an important correlation between Cold War politics and women’s adherence to social norms. Belscamper argued that teen magazines such as *16 Magazine* and *Seventeen* (founded in 1944 and 1956) discouraged anti-social behavior by encouraging girls to practice “civic consumerism”: the demonstration of one’s personal and

civic responsibilities through smart consumer choices. Girls could exercise a degree of freedom and gain social acceptance by making purchasing decisions, albeit ones that usually promoted the magazine’s advertisers.



*16 Magazine*’s focus was more on music stars and teen idols and promoted female satisfaction through fandom. The magazine often featured interviews with idols that typically

described their ideal mate or the perfect date, and “secret sisters” that offered advice to readers. Unlike *Seventeen*, *16 Magazine* was not an ad-supported magazine. Nonetheless, Belscamper insisted that more subtle forms of consumer cultivation operated within the magazine’s pages. Readers could practice the role of a dedicated groupie by buying the right cultural objects, or they could emulate their idols by indulging in similar leisure activities. *16 Magazine* also stood apart from publications like *Seventeen* by offering alternatives to the femininity espoused by adults, and instead providing their young female readers with role models their approximate age.

### GLOBAL GIRLS, LOCAL COLOR

Dawn Fratini’s presentation, “Female-Fashion Currency: The Cultural Exchange of Ideas of Womanhood, via Fashion and Cinema,





Audrey Hepburn with Gregory Peck  
in *Roman Holiday* (1953)

Between Italy and the United States in the Post-War Era," examined intercultural ideas about American and Italian femininity expressed in fashion magazines and movies. Italy's Economic Miracle was a period of growth after World War II accomplished through transforming Italy into a potential marketplace for consumers. Fratini specifically focused on how nationality intersected femininity in the exchange of cultural goods consumed by women. Italian neorealist films often portrayed Italy as pre-modern and poor, and Italian fashions accentuated the use of bright colors and



"Lucy's Italian Movie," *I Love Lucy*, 1956

curve-hugging clothing. Fratini reasoned that as a result of these preconceptions, Americans interpreted Italian women's sexuality as earthy and seductive; these ideals were epitomized by figures such as Italian bombshell Sophia Loren. American women's appropriation of Italian femininity through fashion can be seen in Jackie Kennedy's fondness for Nicole Fontana gowns, Audrey Hepburn's wardrobe in *Roman Holiday* (1953) and even the emulation of "peasant life" in an episode of *I Love Lucy* (entitled "Lucy's Italian Movie" from 1956).



While American women perceived Italian women as seductive peasants donning local designs, Italian media and movies saw American women as pampered movie stars in cosmopolitan clothing. Perhaps the most iconic example of this is Anita Eckberg in Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), where she played a buxom starlet in a slinky black evening gown. Italy's standing as both an underdeveloped country and aspiring industrial nation was played out through discourses in women's fashion and sexuality: Italian women were portrayed as provincial, but they touted a more regionalized (and sexualized) sense of national identity than American women. Fratini's presentation demonstrated how ideals of womanhood and national identity were embedded within the intercultural flow of cultural goods between the United States and Italy.

## ARRESTING IMAGES

Media can powerfully shape representation by naturalizing cultural beliefs about gender. Aubri McDonald's presentation "Frames Fatale: Deconstructing Media Framing of Female Gang Member Convicted of Murder," examined the case study of Jacqueline Montanez, who at the age of fifteen was tried and convicted of two gang-related homicides in Illinois in 1992. McDonald asserts that the investigation and trial overruled the legal protection of

At her trial they told her she was a  
**"Cold-Blooded Assassin"**  
 In the media, she was the  
**"Teen Queen of Criminals"**  
 MEXICAN STUDENTS DE AZTLAN (MESA)  
 & THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SOCIETY PRESENT -  
**"Who is Jacqueline Montanez?"**

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*Come hear her story and decide for yourself. Her case is up for clemency, find out how you can help.*

**Location:**  
*Jane Addams Hull House*  
 800 South Halsted Street

**When:**  
 Wednesday - April 27, 2011  
 1:00pm - 2:30pm

*Refreshments & drinks will be served!*

**The Crime:**  
 In 1992, at 15, Jacqueline Montanez was convicted of killing two gang members. She was tried as an adult and sentenced to spend the rest of her life in prison with no chance for parole. A crime such as this is extremely rare for one so young.

**A Childless Childhood:**  
 Jacqueline suffered violent physical and sexual abuse by her stepfather, a Latin King gang member. The police and CPS blame about the abuse but did nothing to help Jacqueline. At 12 she ran away and joined a new gang. Her victims belonged to her stepfather's gang.

**Retribution:**  
 She knows she did a terrible thing, it always troubles her, and accepts the blame for punishment. Suffering parents to the without possible money and legal representation. Jacqueline has spent at least her life facing conviction, taken college courses and wants to help young girls resist violence.

Contact Aubri McDonald at [amcdonald@uic.edu](mailto:amcdonald@uic.edu) for additional information

Montanez as a juvenile by portraying her as a depraved monster: her acts of violence and perceived lack of remorse put her in violation of both societal law and natural law. McDonald presented news clips of Montanez smiling after being questioned by police, which were used to "prove" her depravity at trial. These same media accounts were also used in the courtroom to characterize Montanez's actions as demonic, incomprehensible, and therefore requiring no further explanation in her defense. Because of this, Montanez's childhood history of neglect and sexual abuse at the hands of her parents—which led to her seeking refuge in a neighbor-

hood gang—were never given consideration. Montanez claimed that the murders were orders made at the behest of her gang, but this was also excluded from the court's consideration.

McDonald's final analysis concluded that the discourse used in media coverage of the trial informed the defense's argument, and by extension the grounds for Montanez's conviction. During the question-and-answer portion of the panel, audience members asked if ethnicity was a factor in her conviction. McDonald pointed out that while Montanez's ethnicity was never explicitly addressed, this was problematically inferred by her membership in a Latin gang. By naturalizing Montanez's actions, the media eviscerated Montanez's personal history and politics of representation.

**Julia Wright is a PhD student in the Department of Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA.**