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BY AMANDA KENDERES

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*REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN NATIONAL BROADCAST NEWS*

BY AMANDA KENDERES

**C**an information be objective when profit-driven? How can individuals engage in civic life when the United States, ostensibly democratic, is in practice plutocratic? When her socioeconomic value is derived more often from her appearance than from her intellect, how is a woman to gain financial security without catering to such expectations and stymieing her intellectual pursuits? Even more importantly, how can issues of gender parity in the workplace be resolved at the workplace level when the workplace itself is built on sexism? These questions and others inspired me to produce *Spitballs at Battleships: A Show and Tell of Women in the News*. This minidocumentary (26 min) exposes the fallacy that national broadcast news is a source of objective journalism

and examines its greater role as entertainment. Certainly, women are part of the news and therefore part of the entertainment. Recognizing this, the film asks a broader and perhaps more pithy question: Are women agents in the degradation of the news or victims of sexism and misogyny?

To frame this inquiry and begin to explore it, I followed the mantra of “show and tell,” organizing my visuals and soundbites to reveal what the news shows us and what it tells us. My title comes from a phrase used by Bernard Goldberg, former CBS News anchor and currently a commentator on Fox News. When discussing representations of truth and power on the news, he warned liberal activists and women, “If [you] want to take shots at me...

[you’re] throwing spitballs at battleships.” I found the phrase perfectly suited to my project, since it effectively illustrates a power asymmetry and demonstrates the hostility often encountered by resistance groups.

In 2009, for the first time since it was founded in 1980, CNN News took third seat to Fox News and MSNBC. A likely reason, and one that my film affirms, is that Fox News and MSNBC have increased their focus on sensationalism, and, along with this, female objectification, sexism, and misogyny. While this argument may seem difficult to substantiate, it is not; a quick search of “sexism Fox News” or “sexism MSNBC” on youtube.com or google.com yields a hefty return, where a search of “sexism CNN” does not. Even such a cursory search proves

to be a consistent and accurate barometer of what a more in-depth inquiry reveals: among the examples, women newscasters on Fox News and MSNBC are consistently scantily dressed; images of women in bikinis, bras, thongs and other revealing attire are used as B-roll (supplemental footage intercut with the main shot in an interview or story) to enhance economic and political reports that would otherwise lack sensation.

Beyond the visual sexism, male news anchors on both stations consistently make remarks (directed toward their female colleagues as well as toward women in the news stories they covered) that are demeaning, dehumanizing, objectifying, violent, or otherwise misogynistic. Chris Matthews, anchor of *Hardball* on MSNBC, for example, asserted that Hillary Clinton did not win a New York Senate seat “on her merit,” but because her husband “messed around.” On Fox News, Greg Gutfeld, **host of *Red Eye***, noted of Courtney Friel that, “if she got any cuter, [he’d] have to beat her to death with a Dr. Hammer.” A regular on Fox News, Marc Rudov stated that “when Barack Obama speaks, men hear: ‘Take off for the future!’ and when Hillary Clinton speaks men hear: ‘Take out the garbage!’”

To help us elucidate the mechanisms behind such sexism, several professors are interviewed: Juliet Williams, Leah Lievrouw, and Doug Kellner of UCLA; Gail Dines of Wheelock College in Boston, and Justin Lewis of the University of Massachusetts. Williams, an associate profes-

or in the Department of Women’s Studies, reminds us of the feminist concept of “male gaze,” which is in her words, “the normative gaze, the dominant presumed watcher.” This concept helps us in considering the central question posed by the film: Are women agents in the degradation of news or victims of sexism and misogyny? As the film shows, women are indeed implicated in their own objectification; yet, they are also victims in that the objectification.

Broadcast news has not always been slanted toward entertainment. The film reveals that women in news have not always dressed this way or been treated this way. The documentary also tackles the issue of resistance, exploring the treatment of professionals (Mika Brezensiki, Gretchen Carlson, and Helen Thomas), who have resisted sexist representations and the degradation of the news. Such resistance is not taken seriously and often backfires, as women’s resistance frequently becomes part of men’s entertainment.

One of the interviewees, Doug Kellner, provided suggestions on how to fight sexism in the media (namely, tuning into alternative news stations and sharpening one’s skills in critical literacy), the mainstream news media is still a major source of information about the world. As Justin Lewis states, the news media “tells us what’s important and who’s important.” As such, it’s telling us that it’s important for women to sex themselves up; that it’s important for women to be young, white, thin,

and toned; that men are more important than women; that men’s voices are more important than women’s voices; that the will of men is more important than the will of women; and that entertainers are more important than politicians. What will the quality of our democracy be if these are the beliefs of its citizens? What are the consequences of having these persistent sexist attitudes on network news normalized for millions of viewers? Since broadcast news is some people’s only window into local, national, and global events, the voice of sexism becomes the standard, not a personal choice. As sexism becomes impossible to dodge, media literacy is all the more critical. Such course offerings as “Critical Media Literacy and Politics of Gender: Theory and Production,” become central to ensuring that future generations can recognize the misleading messages about women that the mainstream media promotes.

**Amanda Kenderes is a Ph.D. student in Social Science and Comparative Education at UCLA. She currently serves as administrative director for the Center for International and Development Education (CIDE) and manager for the W.T. Chan Fellowship program. She looks forward to future work in documentary film, merging cultural studies and feminism.**