8.

REPRESENTATION

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A **representation** is a visual, written, or audio depiction of something or someone. This term also refers broadly to what images and texts *mean,* the meanings that they potentially convey, and how they come to take on those meanings. With respect to the focus of this volume, representation refers to the meanings associated with mediated images and narratives, such as television episodes, films, and music videos. We can also think more specifically of the **politics of representation**, or how representation *matters* for social groups and for society as a whole. This chapter will trace the major theories and methods of criticism in the humanities that have focused on both of these lines of inquiry, understanding how media images and narratives convey meaning, and studying media texts with an eye to how specific social groups, such as women and girls, Muslims, or gay men and lesbians have been portrayed in the entertainment media. While the study of mediated representation can't tell us about every audience member's interpretation of a media text (Chapter 15 in this volume expands on this complexity), it can illuminate some of its potential meanings.

Given the many diverse ways media critics understand representation, it can be a difficult concept to pin down and define. At the same time, representation has been a (if not *the*) primary area of focus driving media studies as a whole. Before media studies existed as we know it today, scholars such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes conducted pioneering work exploring and mapping how language (in the case of Saussure) and popular images and narratives (in the case of Barthes) conveyed meanings; the aim to understand how language and symbols *signify* motivated the work of these two scholars.[1] This line of inquiry was subsequently one of

the catalysts of the birth of film and television studies, and it remains central to media criticism today. Scholars and critics who explore the symbolic meanings and the narrative impact of aesthetic elements of a film, television episode, or other media text, or who explore how ideas about gender, race, sexual orientation, and other social categories are conveyed in that text are all engaging in studies of representation.

Differing theoretical understandings of representation and how and why it matters have spurred the development of diverse and at times oppositional threads of media studies in the humanities. As is explained in more detail below, this has included the growth of structuralist and later post-structuralist understandings of media texts and meaning, the study of the politics of representation in conjunction with the rise of cultural studies, feminist studies, critical race studies, queer studies, and other identity-based studies, and also postmodern and postcolonial studies. **Image analysis**, an approach to studying representation that examines media images in relation to questions of equity, is one of the primary research methods discussed in this chapter. Scholars studying representation often use and may combine other methods, such as **stylistic or formalist analysis** (the study of aesthetic choices and how they lend meaning), **narrative analysis** (the study of stories in media texts), and/or **ideological analysis** or **discourse analysis** (the study of ideological messages or discourses embedded in media texts). These approaches have been utilized extensively by media scholars to explore how particular social groups have been and are represented and to study representation in film, television, and mediated culture more generally. I take up several of these methods as my critical tools in my case study, which I discuss later in this chapter.

A Brief History of the Study of Representation

The study of how media representations convey meaning has its roots in philosophy, linguistics (the study of language), and literary analysis. American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure are among the scholars credited with the invention of **semiotics**, a term coined by Peirce in 1867 to describe the study of symbols or **signs** and the logic of how they convey meaning.[2] Saussure, in research on language and how words and their arrangement make meaning, termed the study of these dynamics **semiology**.[3] The arrangement of words in this sentence, for instance, is an illustration of how structure is tied to meaning. These ideas were further developed by scholars viewed as **structuralists**. These scholars analyzed narratives, language, and elements of popular culture with respect to the impact of structures of meaning. **Structuralism** builds on the assumption that words, images, objects, and behavior within cultural systems have singular meanings, derived through their relationship with other objects within the system in a discernable structure. For instance, meanings were believed to result from binary oppositions (such as good/bad, light/dark, and sacred/profane) creating meaning through contrasts.

Scholars such as anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and literary theorist Roland Barthes popularized structuralism within their respective disciplines. Lévi-Strauss pioneered structuralist anthropology in studies of kinship and popular folk tales in remote regions of the world.[4] He argued that a universal system of meaning, including structuring binaries such as heroism and cowardice, informed the repeated character types and narratives he found in vastly different cultures. Barthes, in turn, brought structuralism to popular journalism and to literary studies. In his writing, he explored seemingly trivial objects and events of mid-1950s French culture—ranging from margarine, to film stars, to cereal boxes—as inscribed with linked cultural meanings and what he termed **myths**, reinforcing popular ideologies of the time.[5] For instance, in "The World of Wrestling," Barthes underscored the appeal of professional wrestling. Examining this performative style of wrestling through a structuralist lens, he described it as the spectacular staging of showdowns between good and evil, with wrestlers portraying exaggerated versions of heroic figures and villains who ultimately received a satisfying comeuppance for their dastardly acts.[6] To provide another illustration, we might

consider Mattel's Barbie® Doll, with its always made-up face and bust–waist–hip proportions that in real life would measure an extraordinary 35–22–32 inches. Despite its role as children's toy, this doll also arguably served to endorse an ideal of thin, busty, and blonde beauty upon its introduction in U.S. culture in 1959. As these examples demonstrate, Barthes' conceptualization of myth links representation to **ideology**, systems of normative ideas and social values. His theory of mythology also usefully overlaps with the concept of **hegemony**, as conceived by Karl Marx and expanded upon by social theorist Antonio Gramsci to describe a ruling group's struggle for dominance, in part through control of representation and thus of social norms and values.[7] Myths as described by Barthes are elements of **hegemonic** influence, endorsing ideas and values of dominant groups within a society.

Structuralism was challenged in the 1960s and 1970s by scholars such as philosopher Jacques Derrida, theorist Michel Foucault, and literary and psychoanalytic scholar Julia Kristeva.[8] These scholars are often described as **post-structuralists**, although they did not always embrace the term. This disparate group was influential in bringing to the study of representation ideological critique, **psychoanalytic theory** (a conceptualization of personality organization and development that guides psychoanalysis), and, in the case of Foucault, consideration of social and historical context and its influence on the multiple meanings potentially attached to representations. Some structuralists, such as Barthes and Foucault, later became post-structuralists as they began to reconsider assumptions of totalizing social structures lending meaning to images and narratives. Barthes' 1967 essay "The Death of the Author," for instance, expressed his newfound belief that the ultimate meanings of a text rested in its readers' interpretations rather than in the text itself.[9] Among its differences from structuralism, **post-structuralism** builds on the assumption that there is no underlying structure of relationships that provides singular or set meanings to social phenomena. Post-structuralism also overlaps with postmodern theory, discussed below, particularly in challenging "**grand narratives**." This term, coined by theorist Jean-François Lyotard, refers to narratives that historically have influenced social relations, cultural memory, and public interpretations of meanings, such as the former belief in an "American melting pot" that gave all Americans equal status.[10] Derrida argued for scholars to engage in **deconstruction,** the analysis of representation from a post-structuralist critical stance.

Put simply, deconstruction involves reading a text against the grain in order to examine the many ambiguities inherent in its history, linked meanings, and embedded ideologies. For example, Jordon Peele's 2017 horror film *Get Out,* about an African American young man who faces life-threatening dangers when his white girlfriend takes him home to meet her parents, smartly deconstructs Hollywood paradigms. To do so, it builds on its audience's knowledge of the typical marginalization of African Americans in horror films to build tension and to prompt humor and surprise (Figure 8.1). Deconstruction carried to its fullest extent by Derrida and other scholars considered **high post-structuralists** ultimately finds meaning itself so ambiguous that it is impossible to pin down, a theoretical stance that most media scholars have not found useful as a critical tool.

The study of representation also includes a long tradition of critique of how various social groups and **identities** have been represented in the media and popular culture more broadly. This scholarship informs and is part of the disciplines of **feminist studies**, **critical race studies**, **queer studies**, **postcolonial studies**, **class studies**, and **disability studies**, which approach representation with a primary focus on gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, colonization and its aftermath, class, and ability, respectively. The broadening of film and television studies to include a focus on representation in relation to these axes of identity coincided in the late 1960s and early '70s with the rise of **identity politics**, or identity-based consciousness and activism. Women, people of color, LGBTQ people, and working-class people were among the groups actively reflecting on the impact of their identities on their status and opportunities and agitating for better treatment in society.

Critiques of representation in film and television with respect to identity and marginalization also entered public conversation through the forum of the popular press. This included books and magazine articles by feminist writers such as Betty Friedan, who wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, and Molly Haskell, whose *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* was published in 1974, who made a major impact in raising public consciousness regarding sexism embedded in popular culture.[11] Authors who similarly engaged in early writing about race and sexual orientation in media representation included James Baldwin and Donald Bogle, who wrote about how African American characters and stars were represented in Hollywood film and publicity, and Vito Russo, who wrote *The Celluloid Closet,* the first extensive survey of the treatment of gay and lesbian characters in Hollywood film.[12]

The first scholars of the politics of representation engaged in image analysis, often studying **stereotypes**, images of a social group that are misleading, denigrating, and/or homogenizing. George Gerbner and Gaye Tuchman, for instance, pioneered the study of what Gerbner termed **symbolic annihilation**.[13] Tuchman broke this concept down into three separate dynamics—omission, trivialization, and condemnation—in her study of how women were misrepresented and often excluded from films and television in the early 1970s.[14] Questions of **realism**, or of whether media portrayals accurately reflect real life, at times entered these critiques. Feminist critics, for instance, challenged representations that posited women and girls as the "frailer sex," pointing to how this construction inaccurately **naturalized** supposed differences between women and men as innate. In connection with this work,
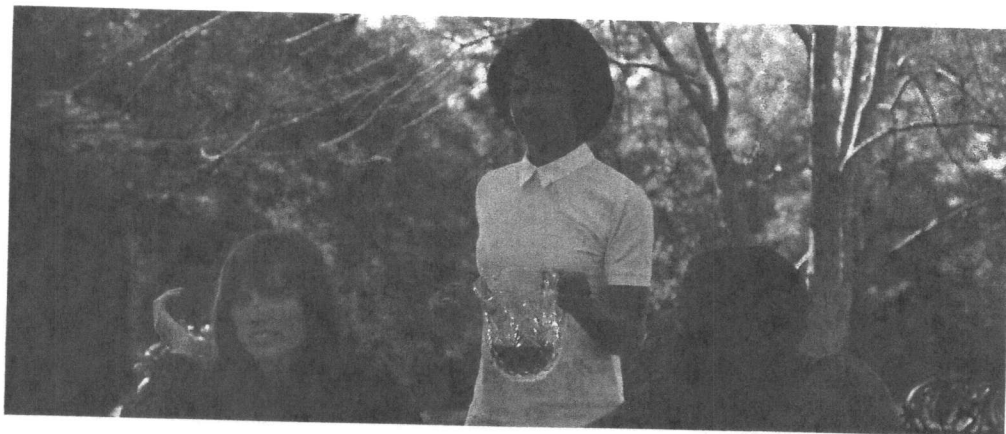

Figure 8.1 The film *Get Out* (dir. Jordan Peele, Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2017) engages in post-structuralist stance in its deconstruction of common patterns of representation for African American characters in horror films

some activist writers urged their groups to demand more "positive" images and to take up the tools of production to counter Hollywood's patterns of representation. Over time, media advocacy groups, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Hispanic Media Coalition (NHMC), and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), began to take up these charges, while scholars shifted to more nuanced and theoretically grounded studies of representation.

Scholars who were part of this next wave of scholarship included but were not limited to Laura Mulvey, bell hooks, Richard Dyer, Edward Said, and Charlotte Brunsdon.[15] Scholars with theoretical grounding in postcolonial studies and cultural studies such as Said and Stuart Hall engaged in study of what they called **Othering**, dynamics by which marginalized groups in a society are constructed through their representations in popular culture as potential threats or as in need of guidance and control.[16] With a similar focus but in the realm of feminist studies, Mulvey and Brunsdon were among the pioneering scholars studying women's images and how feminist perspectives were often absent or distorted in film and television.[17]

With scholarly grounding in film studies and ethnic studies, Dyer's *White,* in turn, was the first comprehensive study of the privileging of whiteness in Hollywood film,[18] while scholars such as Jacqueline Bobo, Jane Gaines, and bell hooks broke new ground in analysis of African American women's media representation and how they negotiated limitations in representation through their viewing practices.[19] This and other scholarship on the representation of various ethnic groups ultimately was foundational to what is now called **critical race studies**, the application of critical theory and scholarship in various disciplines to study links between race and social power in society. Bobo, Gaines, hooks, and others also modeled **intersectional analysis,** or study with attention to elements of identity, such as gender and race, along more than one axis. **Intersectionality** was championed by African American feminist theorists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, who challenged white feminist scholars to consider how their conceptualization of "women" often left out women of color and pointed to the need for analyses that instead focused on multiple axes of identity.[20]

Cultural studies, an approach developed in part at the University of Birmingham in the UK in the 1960s, also made a major contribution to the study of representation. Combining theory and methods from a wide variety of disciplines, including sociology, feminist studies, anthropology, history, and art/literary criticism, it focuses in particular on the dynamics of hegemony, social power, and audiences' negotiations with what they consume in the media. The work of Antonio Gramsci, described above in relation to his conceptualization of hegemony, also influenced cultural studies scholars' ideas of agency and **resistance**, or counter-hegemonic activity, in audience responses to hegemonic popular culture.[21] Cultural studies scholars and theories have been important to studies of media representation of marginalized individuals and social groups, particularly youth and subcultures (e.g., the work of Dick Hebdige), people of color (such as in the work of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy), and girls and women (as in Angela McRobbie's and Charlotte Brunsdon's scholarship).[22] Hall in particular was influential for building on Gramsci's understanding of hegemonic culture. In doing so, he emphasized the **polysemy** (multiple meanings) of media texts and how audiences actively engage with what they consume in the media.[23] His theory of **encoding** and **decoding** was foundational in this regard.[24]

Postcolonial studies also was influential in the development of the study of representation, particularly in relation to global hegemonies. Postcolonial studies examines the impact of **colonialism** and **imperialism**, the long-term subjugation of entire countries and of colonized people and cultures, and how this oppression has influenced cultures and their systems of knowledge. In the mid to late twentieth century, influential postcolonial studies scholars included literary scholar Homi K. Bhabha, psychiatrist Franz Fanon, who studied the dynamics of dehumanization experienced by colonized people, and cultural theorist Edward Said, who is best known for his explication of **Orientalism**, a concept linked to the dynamics of Othering.[25] Said posits Orientalism as the dynamic by which Western scholarship and literature on the East have reified global structures of power and imperialism through reinforcing notions of an East–West binary. Through this binary, Western cultures are seen as intellectual, rational, and stable, and Eastern cultures and people as primitive, irrational, and weak.

Finally, scholars of **postmodernism**, such as Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, have stressed that representation and identity are not fixed and in fact can be hybrid, fluid, and performative.[26] Postmodernism is defined in multiple and, at times, diverging ways by scholars. Most broadly it is described as an aesthetic or worldview that

breaks from and questions the master narratives of the past and is related to an era in which culture is increasingly fragmented, media driven, and hybrid. The concepts of hybridity and performativity, which derive from postmodern and postcolonial studies, will be described in further detail below.

Reading Representation: Concepts and Terms for Your Critical Tool Box

Media scholars from differing theoretical orientations use distinct terms and concepts, and indeed may disagree regarding the most constructive objects of study and the questions to ask when it comes to studying representation. It is useful to learn about as many of these modes and concepts as possible in order to understand their overlaps and distinctions. In this section, we'll review a number of commonly used concepts, terms, and approaches that may be useful for your own critiques of representation in entertainment media texts and for articulating your conclusions.

In semiotics, the study of representation begins with a focus on a narrative unit that is rarely but occasionally considered in media criticism, the **sign**. Signs are units of meaning that are further broken down into two parts, the **signifier** and the **signified**. The signifier is the material part of the sign, while the signified refers to the social meanings attached to that signifier. For example, a heart-shaped container of chocolates given to another person is both a container filled with candy (the sign's signifier) and a symbol of love for one's sweetheart (what is signified).

Two other terms that derive from semiotics that are often used by other scholars exploring representation are **denotation** and **connotation**. A study of representation in a film, television episode, or other media text typically begins with focus on denotation, an assessment of the material image and narrative and their most manifest, external qualities. This would entail a focus on aesthetic elements, or a **stylistic analysis** of a media text. The media critic would then move on to discern the connotative, or submerged, meanings of these style choices—the linked cultural meanings, ideologies, and myths. Such meanings are not simply attached to a particular image but are culturally constituted in relation to the particular era and place in which a representation circulates. For example, in an episode of the television sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (TBS, 2007–), about a group of nerdy male friends in the contemporary United States, Sheldon, the most socially awkward of the group, has to be schooled regarding the semiotics of his housemate's tie hung outside their locked apartment door while romantic music plays inside (Figure 8.2). The connotation that he finally understands is that the tie is a warning to stay away because his housemate is inside with a woman with whom he hopes to get amorous. While on its face it's just a tie (its denotative meaning), with respect to its connotative meaning in contemporary culture, it is telling Sheldon, "Do not disturb!" The two meanings of the tie illustrate how

Figure 8.2 Sheldon is schooled in how to read the semiotics of his housemate's tie on their front door in *The Big Bang Theory*, "The Hamburger Postulate" (CBS, October 21, 2007)

representation can be fruitfully analyzed in relation to denotative and connotative meanings as understood within a social and cultural context.

The related concepts of **ideology** and **discourse** also are useful to understanding representation in relation to linked meanings and social impact. Ideology refers to systems of beliefs and ideals, particularly those that undergird the dominant politics and social values in a society, such as capitalism and patriarchy in the United States. As noted above, Barthes was one of the first scholars to imply that representation is inherently ideological. The overlapping term discourse refers to socially sanctioned ways of thinking that define what can be said about a topic and how it is represented. Discourse thus also can be understood as hegemonic in function. Michel Foucault most notably illustrated how discourses are both discernible in popular culture and powerful in their impact in his in-depth examinations of how discourses of knowledge and of power have been shaped by and have profoundly shaped Western societies. For example, in *History of Sexuality*, he examined how past and current discourses of sexuality have maintained laws and taboos that support the societal structure of the family as we know it.[27]

The concept of **stereotyping,** while limited in what it illuminates, was useful as an early springboard to the study of representation. The term has disciplinary roots in philosophy, psychology, and sociology. As cognitive psychologists note, we make sense of the world through categorizing objects and people into **types**, in a process that becomes negative with the addition of **xenophobia**, the fear or dislike of people we deem different from our own group. When these ideas become integrated into media narratives, mediated **stereotypes** can take the form of stock characters that come to falsely stand in for a group. Walter Lippman is credited with coining the term in 1922.[28] A public intellectual focused on issues of democracy, Lippman argued that stereotypes about marginalized groups were being disseminated through the new medium of that era, newspapers. The subsequent rise of film, radio, and television similarly prompted attention from scholars in the social sciences to their integration of cultural stereotypes and the impact on audiences. A 1930s study that was a part of the Payne Fund studies, for instance, found that the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* reinforced denigrating stereotypes of African Americans and ultimately encouraged white youth who watched it to form strongly negative opinions of them.[29]

In an overlapping approach grounded in the humanities, Hall described historical patterns of Othering non-white groups as **racialized regime(s) of representation**, similar to Said's explication of Orientalism.[30] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam usefully expand on this previous work in exploring what they term **Eurocentrism**, historical patterns of representation in film that have privileged the Western world, whiteness, and patterns of global oppression.[31] Contemporary studies of **gendered** or **racialized** images similarly examine those images in relation to historical patterns of representation for a gender or for a specific racial or ethnic group.

The concept of **the gaze**, in turn, emphasizes these dynamics in production practices. The **male gaze**, a term coined by Laura Mulvey, describes the dynamics of **objectification** in relation to female characters in film. As Mulvey notes in relation to the male gaze, female characters in film were (and often still are) constructed primarily as passive objects to be looked at, in other words, as damsels in distress or one-dimensional love interests, in contrast with male characters, who have more often been constructed as active subjects in film.[32] The concept of the gaze also highlights imbalances experienced by women in the media industries with respect to having less power and agency to write, produce, or "green light" media texts. Manthia Diawara and bell hooks built on this scholarship to address parallel imbalances for African Americans inherent to what they termed the **white gaze**, while E. Ann Kaplan, described the **imperial gaze** as a way of seeing evident in media texts linked to global histories of colonization.[33]

In addition, two concepts help scholars address nuances in the social dynamics related to representation: hybridity and performativity. The concept of **hybridity**, as developed by Homi K. Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, Nestor García Canclini, and others, calls attention to and describes the mixed and fluid identities and cultures that often form within postcolonial and postmodern societies such as the contemporary United States.[34] Hybridity also serves to challenge essentialism in scholarship on social categories, identity, and representation. **Performativity** refers to individuals' construction and performance of identities, which are based in part on social discourses that also influence how those identities are perceived. Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, and Werner Sollors are among the scholars that have written about the performativity and fluidity of social categories such as gender (in the case of Butler and de Lauretis) and race

(Sollors' focus).[35] Such scholarship reminds us that representation itself should not be taken for granted, that identity categories can be permeable, unstable, and complex, and that the media play a role in the construction of our ideas of social categories.

It also is helpful to have an understanding of three terms that claim to address contemporary representation but that have been contested by media scholars, **post-racialism**, **postfeminism**, and **post-queer**. **Post-racial** is a term that has been used particularly by conservative pundits to describe U.S. society as having transcended race and racism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it began to appear in journalistic writing in 2008 as mixed-race President Barack Obama took office. Since then, it has been deployed at times to describe media texts, particularly those that feature themes and aesthetics linked to multiculturalism, such as the *Fast and Furious* franchise. In media studies, post-racialism has been critiqued by scholars such as Ralina L. Joseph and Catherine Squires for inaccurately implying that patterns of racial representation have substantially changed.[36] Postfeminism and related aesthetic and thematic trends in representation have similarly been debunked by scholars. Cultural theorists Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie have described **postfeminist** representation in media culture as a sensibility that often repudiates feminism, even while it paradoxically may rely on feminist discourse and aesthetics.[37] In other words, postfeminist media representations suggest that sexism has been overcome and that gender equality exists. As an ideological style of representation, postfeminism involves the presentation of women and girls as independent and confident to a degree, but also as traditionally feminine and/or anti-feminist. For example, a nearly naked Miley Cyrus performing "Wrecking Ball" in her 2013 music video could be viewed as a postfeminist celebrity image, in light of the contradictions she embraces in her performance as a strong, independent woman while also making her body the object of sexual display. Finally, the term **post-queer** has been defined in two distinct ways. In popular writing, post-queer (or similarly, post-gay or post-lesbian) has referred to a belief that sexual orientation no longer matters because of progress achieved in LGBTQ rights, witnessed, for example, in the greater numbers of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans celebrities choosing to be out. This belief has been challenged by scholars such as Michael Warner, who argue that U.S. social institutions continue to naturalize heterosexuality as the preferred social norm.[38] In an overlapping area of debate, post-queer refers to a push by some queer theory scholars to move beyond an emphasis on subjectivity and categories of sexual orientation in order to be able to study heteronormativity as a broader social force.[39]

A Case Study in Interpreting Representation: *Macha* Latinas

As this overview illustrates, the divergent ways in which representation has been understood and studied are nothing if not complex. How might a media critic incorporate these approaches and concepts in exploration of one example of media representation? This is very much up to you; in relation to own your research questions and goals, as well as your object of study. In this section, I explore a case study from my own work as a model of media criticism with a focus on representation.

In "Más Macha: The New Latina Action Hero," I analyze how Latina protagonists in several late 1990s and early 2000s films were represented and to what end, with respect to their possible linked meanings and significance.[40] My objects of study consisted of roles played by Jennifer Lopez and Michelle Rodriguez in five films. These included Lopez's characters in the films *Out of Sight* (1998), *Angel Eyes* (2001), and *Enough* (2002)—roles as police officers and as an abused ex-wife who learns to fight back—and Rodriguez's characters in *Girlfight* (2000) and *Resident Evil* (2002), a troubled high school student who finds confidence in the world of boxing and a futuristic soldier fighting zombies and other dangers. In each film, the protagonists were notable for moments in which they demonstrated physical capabilities and bravery.

What spurred my interest in exploring these characters further was that they were markedly different from their white counterparts in earlier action films, such as Sarah Connor, played by Linda Hamilton in the first two *Terminator* films (1984 and 1990); Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver in four *Aliens* films (1979–1997); and Samantha Caine/Charly Baltimore, played by Geena Davis in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996). As Yvonne Tasker detailed in a study of 1990s female action protagonists, these characters underwent a dramatic transformation, becoming noticeably tougher, less traditionally feminine, and, particularly in the case of Sarah Connor, more muscular.[41] In Tasker's analysis, semiotics proved useful: the characters she analyzed had shed the visual trappings of Hollywood-defined femininity. It would seem that

only after these transformations did these characters possess the physical toughness and the emotional stoicism needed to take up the mantle of the action heroine and face the villain or conflict, whether it was a monster, a bad guy, or another calamity.

The films featuring Latinas didn't follow this trajectory, however. For example, Lopez's characters Karen Sisco in *Out of Sight* and Sharon Pogue in *Angel Eyes*, and Rodriguez's Diana Guzman in *Girlfight* did not undergo a physical transformation or eschew hegemonic markers of femininity, such as long hair, high-heeled shoes, or lipstick, as they steeled themselves to take on the challenges ahead. Diana Guzman, for her part, did dress as and take on the persona of a boxer as she trained, but she didn't cut her hair short to do it. Why were these characters represented so differently from their unambiguously white counterparts? To answer this question, I needed to better understand how these characters were represented within their respective films. To do so, I conducted textual analysis rooted in the principles of semiotics, in conjunction with **genre criticism** with attention to Latinas and the evolution of the action genre. My critique also entailed historical analysis grounded in cultural studies as I considered these representations in relation to the regime of representation that Latinas had experienced in Hollywood films. To illuminate how I went about this work, let's turn back to *Out of Sight*.

In the romantic thriller *Out of Sight*, Karen Sisco is a federal marshal who ends up ambushed and unwittingly sharing a car trunk with Jack Foley (George Clooney), a thief she had been charged with bringing to prison. She ultimately falls for Foley; her full intentions are unclear as she follows the escaped criminal and his crew, who are competing with a more hardened group of criminals trying to steal some diamonds. Despite being fooled once, she is portrayed as a woman not to be messed with. In contrast to white female action protagonists, such as Ripley or Sarah Connor, Sisco is feminine by Hollywood standards, and her appearance does not change in the course of the narrative. In addition, while I noted in my analysis that Karen Sisco is ethnically ambiguous, I interpreted her as Latina in my reading of the film. Why might this be the case? In this instance, I felt Jennifer Lopez's star image as Latina, particularly after playing beloved Mexican American singer Selena in the eponymous *Selena* (Gregory Nava, Warner Home Video, 1997), had a strong influence. My interpretation highlights how a critic's response, particularly to a star's history, can play a role in representation analysis.

In exploring Karen Sisco's character with respect to denotation, I noted that she is slim (but curvaceous) and is always professionally but femininely attired. She wears perfect, glossy lipstick, even on the job, and does not sport noticeable biceps. She comports herself with confidence and speaks perfect, unaccented English in a slightly husky voice. In the scene in which Sisco faces the most clear physical danger, during an interview with a menacing African American informant in his own home, she handily uses a retractable police baton to put the informant in his place without a trace of hesitation or fear. At the time, Sisco is clothed in a tight leather skirt and top that has simultaneous connotations of "badass," "classy" (it appears to be an expensive designer outfit), and "overtly feminine" in the visual lexicon of American popular culture (Figure 8.3). Her spoken dialogue to the man is tough, to the point, and betrays a touch of confident humor: "You said you wanted to tussle. We tussled." My semiotic analysis honed in on the signifiers of traditional femininity and fierceness that are combined in the construction of Sisco, and their connotative meanings: strength, resilience—*and* sexiness.

To further illuminate the meanings attached to Lopez's and Rodriguez's characters in the films I studied, I also engaged in genre criticism with a focus on racial and gendered representation in the evolution of action films and television. Traditionally a white and male-centered domain with roots in the Western, the action films of the 1980s emphasized a powerful, muscular, and typically white male body as a symbol of the capabilities of the hero, as noted by scholars such as Yvonne Tasker, Susan Jeffords, and Richard Dyer.[42] Female characters, if they did appear, were usually relegated to the roles of damsel in distress and love interest. Increasing genre hybridity and film budgets in the 1990s led to changing narrative expectations and the desire for a broader and more diverse audience with respect to gender and ethnicity, however. The combination of action and science fiction genres, for instance, meant that women's physical capabilities might be included within a narrative at the safe remove of fantasy.[43] These shifts encouraged the entrance of action protagonists of color and female action heroines, among them characters played by Wesley Snipes, Angela Bassett, and Lucy Liu. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, this led to openings for a few Latinas. By this period, the slippage of the borders between the action genre and other genres had fully called into question who could be described as an action hero.

Exploring this history helps us to understand the casting of Lopez and Rodriguez in their respective
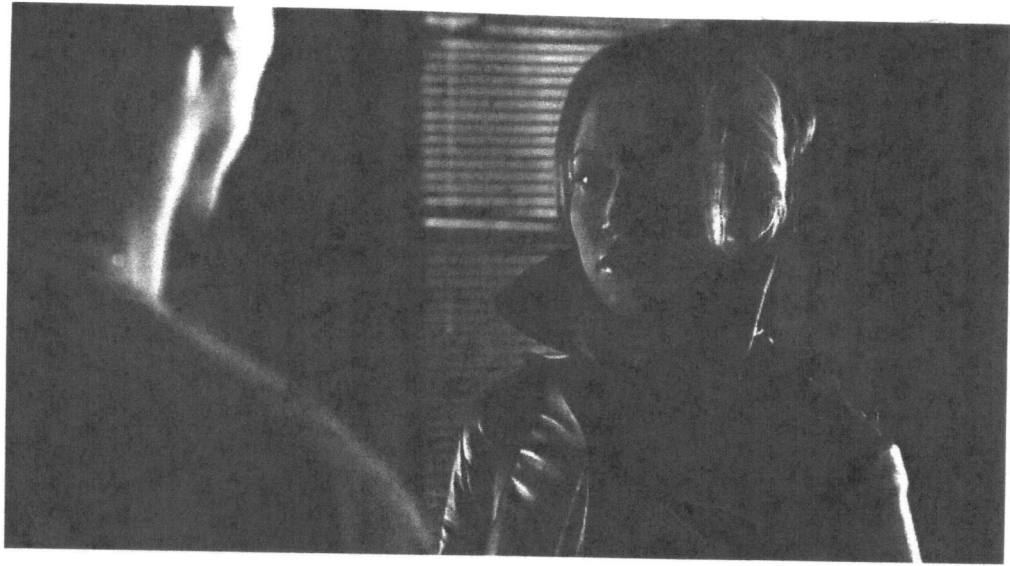
Figure 8.3 Karen Sisco, as played by Jennifer Lopez in *Out of Sight* (dir. Steven Soderbergh, Universal Studios, 1998), is depicted as both feminine and fierce

films, but does not fully explain the choices made regarding the development of their characters. At this point, I found it useful to explore the regimes of representation experienced by Latinas in Hollywood film more broadly. As Charles Ramírez Berg and other historians of Latina and Latino cinematic representation have documented, femininity was often racially coded in studio-era Hollywood films, to the detriment of Latina characters.[44] In a classic example, the Western *High Noon* (1952), Amy Fowler, the white newlywed Quaker wife of Marshal Will Kane played by Grace Kelly, is white, blonde, and impeccably clothed and groomed, an idealized feminine beauty. She also is sheltered, passive, and presumably chaste. In contrast, the Mexican American saloon owner Helen Ramírez (Katy Jurado) is not considered a worthy marriage partner by the white men of the town, despite the fact that several had past romances with her. Notions of race and class play into this narrative; the two characters embody constructed ideals of the "feminine" white woman and "transgressive" Latina. This was not unusual for the time: Latina characters historically were constructed in opposition to hegemonic constructions of idealized (and white) femininity. As actress Rita Moreno has noted in relation to her career in the 1950s and 1960s, if Latina actors were cast as love interests during this era, it was only as temporary love interests, to be dropped when more suitable (white) marriage partners arrived on the scene.[45] Both in Hollywood films and in American social life in the 1950s, white females also were commonly associated with the domestic sphere and roles as wives and homemakers.

In contrast, Latinas were more likely to have to work outside the home. Some also were, by necessity or choice, as Rosa Linda Fregoso puts it, "*pachuca-chola-homegirls*" who knew how to handle themselves outside the protection of the domestic sphere.[46] This cinematic history clarifies why Karen Sisco and the other Latina action protagonists didn't need Sarah Connor biceps or a more androgynous appearance in order to be viewed as physically capable and unafraid; based on the racialized regimes of representation that Latinas experienced in film and popular culture, they arguably were already viewed as ready to take on the challenges ahead, as able to be believably strong, brave, and also beautiful.

My study concludes with an unanswered question regarding these characters and the hegemonic meanings implied for physically capable Latinas. Are these examples of empowered women or of stereotypically aggressive women? Is this a progressive opening of Latina representation to new possibilities of representation or simply more of the usual? Multiple and potentially contradicting meanings can be gleaned from the construction of Karen Sisco and the other Latina action heroines for each reader.

As a media critique focused on representation, this study of Latina action protagonists reflects my own subject position and knowledge of regimes of representation. Like any such study, it has limitations, however. In retrospect, I would add further consideration of whether the always-feminine Latina is a progressive construction in relation to the white male dominance of Hollywood film behind the scenes and on screen, as manifest in patterns of representation

and in the white and male gaze. In addition, I believe it would be useful to explore whether these Latina characters might have been linked to postfeminist representational trends in 1990s media culture. Like Xena and high school cheerleader-turned-vampire slayer Buffy Summers, also popular during this decade, Karen Sisco and the other Latina action heroines could be viewed as 1990s postfeminist figures who were strong, silent about their views on feminism, and also conventionally feminine and pretty.

Representation as Critical Focus: Final Thoughts

While we are less likely to see obviously racist, sexist, or otherwise xenophobic images or media narratives today, social inequities and the stigmatization of some groups still are manifest in a variety of ways in films, television, and other entertainment media. For this reason, a focus on representation can help media scholars gain valuable insights regarding the construction and significance of media images and narratives, particularly regarding associations that media texts may reinforce or challenge about the groups being represented. For example, some groups, including but not limited to women, Latina/os, and people of Arab and Middle Eastern descent, continue to be less visible in the entertainment media as protagonists and as storytellers behind the scenes, and to often be represented in a manner that symbolically denies their worth to society. If we want to be able to critique these dynamics, it is vital to possess the critical tools and language with which to scrutinize and better understand media texts through a focus on representation. This is especially important in our contemporary environment, in which complex media texts can appear to signal that discrimination and oppression no longer exist.

The field of media representation studies thus is still robust, with sub-disciplines such as Middle Eastern and Islamic media studies and feminist media studies flourishing. Recent scholarship is grappling with the complexity of contemporary media texts and ideologically diverging approaches to the politics of representation, as in media criticism that has challenged modern myths that we have become a post-racial, postfeminist, or post-queer culture. Contemporary scholarship with a focus on representation tends to combine this focus with other critical approaches, moreover, such as through an emphasis on ideology, genre, stardom, industry studies, or on

how audience members are interpreting, responding to, or even creating their own media texts. For readers of this chapter, your future endeavors to critique films, television, and other media will similarly benefit from taking up multiple methods as a part of your work.

Notes

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4. See, for example, Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Structural Study of Myth, Vol. I* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), *The Structural Study of Myth, Vol. II* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), and *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

5. See, for example: Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* and *Mythologies*.

6. Barthes, "The World of Wrestling," *Mythologies*, 15–25.

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8. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) and *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978); Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. and trans. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, trans. León S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

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14. Tuchman, "Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media."

15. Their relevant publications include but are not limited to Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18; bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981) and *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Books, 1992); Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), 13–74; Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* (London: Routledge, 1993) and *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Operas to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997).

16. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 1978/2003); Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), 223–79.

17. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"; Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Operas to Satellite Dishes*.

18. Dyer, *White*.

19. Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Jane Gaines, "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory," *Cultural Critique* 4 (Autumn 1986): 59–79; hooks, *Black Looks*.

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21. Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks.*

22. Their relevant publications include but are not limited to Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979); Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities" in *ICA Documents 7: Black Film, British Cinema*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London: Institute for Contemporary Arts, 1988), 27–31, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10, No. 2 (1986): 5–27, and *Representation*; Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987) and *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993); Angela McRobbie, "Jackie: An Ideology of Adolescent Femininity," *CCCS Stenciled Papers* (Birmingham: Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1978) and her edited collection *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses: An Anthology of Fashion and Music* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988); Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* and *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000).

23. Hall, "The Work of Representation."

24. "Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse," *CCCS Stenciled Paper No. 7* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1973).

25. For a sampling of their relevant scholarship, see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963) and *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Said, *Orientalism.*

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28. Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1922).

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30. Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," 225–79.

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44. Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latinos in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

45. Mary Beltrán, *Latina/o Stars in U.S. Eyes: The Making and Meanings of Film and TV Stardom* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

46. Rosa Linda Fregoso, "Homegirls, Cholas, and Pachucas in Cinema," *California History* 74, no. 3 (1995): 317–27. Fregoso is referring to terms used to describe young Latinas who chose to be proudly visible in U.S. urban public culture in the 1930s and '40s (pachucas), in the 1970s and '80s (cholas), and in the present day (homegirls).

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