

REPORT

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SOFT POWER: HEROINES AND DOLLS IN MEDIA CULTURE

Asunción Bernárdez Rodal

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Asunción Bernárdez is one of the leading researchers in Gender and Communication in Spain. This is her most recent work and involves a feminist, varied and necessary approach to cultural products, because of their power in sex-gender constructions. As she explains on the first pages, "a more egalitarian world would be a better world" and "media analyzes are also a way of doing politics" (pp. 13-14). With these precedents, she speaks of the power of the media to intervene in the formation of ideology and borrows a concept of political theory, widely used by cultural criticism: *soft power*. "This Anglicism means *soft power* and was invented by the theorist Joseph Nye, who coined it in the 1990s to explain how cultural and ideological media can be put at the service of states. *Soft power* is opposed to *hard power*: hard powers, such as economic power or the coercive structures of the State" (p. 13).

Bernárdez says that her "text does not intend to be academic or systematic. Its objective is to analyze how the mainstream productions that are produced mostly in the United States build the models of women the public has liked most in recent times: the new heroines and the new dolls" (p. 14). Of course, it attains it, with an unusual, varied and suggestive result, in several chapters that explore cyborg women, Barbie dolls, artificial bodies of women in advertising, symbolic battles in cultural industries, women in current sport information and the heroines of utopian and dystopian fictions, such as *Wonder Woman*, *The Hunger Games* or *Outlander*. Fully adhered to the cultural novelty, there will be no reader who does not reconsider with these respectful and so well theoretically armed analyzes.

The fourth chapter on bodies of air, bodies of flesh, advertising and artifices of women is particularly suggestive. The author talks about idealized, sexualized, overexposed bodies, bodies without flesh, closed bodies and thing-bodies. "We do not see women, but dolls, representations of women" (p. 68). She reviews Guy Debord, Roland Barthes, John Berger, Erving Goffman, Marthe Nussbaum and concludes: "Advertising is powerful, not because we believe its messages literally, but because it creates an ecosystem of images that gives entity and meaning to the world around us". (pp. 69-70).

Also outstanding is the fifth chapter, on symbolic battles and gendered tastes in the cultural industries. Bernárdez analyzes the passion for heroes, which is always masculine. She dismantles the idea that heroes are no longer fashionable and

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antiheroes are triumphant."As a society, we still like the heroic material (...) Fiction covers the gap between what is normative and desire" (p. 88). With the theories of the Chicago School and the Frankfurt School, she comes to Janice Radway (1984), who in her work *Reading the Romance*, determined that "many housewives liked to read romantic novels (a devalued product) because it facilitates the search for one's own time devoted to personal enjoyment within the routine housework and because the models of men and women that appear in them could be inspiring when it comes to deciding changes in their personal lives" (p. 92). From there she jumps to *Wonder Woman*, *The Hurt Locker*, or the current American actresses, Emma Watson, Jennifer Lawrence, Charlize Theron and Reese Witherspoon, who viralized the movements #He Forshe, # Time'sUp, # AskHerMore, #MeToo.

As stated by the professor and researcher: "The media are not the mirror of the world, but they pretend to be". With their symbolic power, they have "the power to represent, the power to appoint and therefore to categorize what you can think and what you cannot" (pp. 30-31). Hence the importance, relevance and necessity of this title.

Asunción Bernárdez is Permanent Professor and Director of the Feminist Research Institute of the Complutense University of Madrid. She teaches the subjects of Communication and Gender, Semiotics of Mass Media and Information Theory, at the Faculty of Information Sciences. She has been coordinator of the Doctorate in Feminist and Gender Studies and of the Master's Degree in Feminist Studies, both at UCM. She has also been part of the commission of experts for gender violence in the media of the Ministry of Equality. PhD in Journalism and Bachelor of Hispanic Philology from UCM, she currently directs the R & D Program Excellence Program, entitled *Cultural Producers in social networks: industry, popular consumption and audiovisual literacy of Spanish youth with a gender perspective*; and the Banco Santander Project - Complutense University of Madrid, entitled *Digital divide between professors and university students: Cultural production and consumption through social networks (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter)*. She carries out numerous international high-impact research works about the analyses of gender discourses, both textual and audiovisual. In 2015, she published the book *Women in the Media: Proposals to analyze mass communication with a gender perspective*, in Fundamentos Publishing House.

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