Mediated Images


What do we see when we look at a photograph in a magazine or a televised sport event? Different consumers see things differently. This raises questions for scholars and media workers alike about the role that the media plays in the production of images and their subsequent consumption. This consumption has been cultivated by a communications revolution in the twentieth century. Television, films, newspapers, magazines, digital billboards and screens, computer games and the internet — which utilise a range of audio-visual sensory techniques — have all facilitated instantaneous global broadcasting. The marketing of visual imagery has been an integral aspect of these developments in mass media transmission. In the context of the communications revolution, images convey meanings that transcend the simple sale of merchandised goods and products. Images highlight and sell ways of life, tastes, and ways of distinguishing oneself that are both tangible and intangible. They attempt to visually stimulate the audience into identifying with and accepting pre-constructed messages and meanings that provide a sense of immediacy and the feeling of being there.

The authors of the books reviewed here all analyse the mechanisms used by the media to push images well beyond the mere representation of original subjects. While the reproduced image might appear as a moment of reality and truth, captured by the all-seeing eye of the artist with her camera, it is in the darkroom, during the development phase, that the image is actually manufactured. Within the selection and processing stage of image production, the media can influence consumer perception using these manufactured and realistic image representations. These representations communicate cultural, political and social perspectives with far reaching effect. As Cyndi Tebbel notes, citing the poet Allen Ginsberg, ‘whoever controls the media ... controls the culture’ (p. 89). This control of culture stems from the media projecting only those images that they believe represent ideal social norms in a favourable light. Although the different outlets that constitute the media provide an
extensive and diverse range of information, the consequence of the communications revolution is that audiences have effectively lost the freedom to choose content matter and to assess the truth for themselves.

The media pre-interpret the communication for distribution to the mass audience. Pre-interpretation of information, despite appearing to simply reflect the reality of the lived experience, is an intricate and complicated media process. The authors of the books under review highlight the complex marketing, production-design and strategic influences that are involved in creating the impression that the image merely reflects reality. Although the authors individually examine a broad range of issues around sport and popular culture, a common thread is the mediated techniques and mechanisms associated with the production of media images. They examine the influential position of the media which uses moving and still imagery to convey information which most scholars believe play an increasingly influential role in society. Of particular significance is the way the authors of these books identify white, middle-class, heterosexual male values as the key regulators of media communication, entertainment, sport and other forms of popular culture: the worldview of this group provides ‘the model of what is seen as normal.’ The media effectively channels this normality by using image techniques that positively reinforce their social norms. Dominant cultural meanings are both explicit and implicit within existing media imaging techniques. This review focuses on the techniques that the authors’ highlight as pivotal in enabling media to maintain influence and control within society.

Technical Manipulation and the Symbolic Representation of Media Images

Visually appealing images that have been technically and strategically produced to captivate us influence our daily lives. These visually appealing images are transmitted via numerous channels and are shown in close-up, in slow motion, full-action and full colour to illuminate larger-than-life representations of reality. Society has become socialised into accepting photographic reproductions as a true likeness, the camera becoming ‘the eye of modern technology’. Enhanced media-production techniques helps convince consumers that the images in front of them are authentic. This authenticity is achieved, not just within the immediate visual delivery, but also in the broader content and context of the image, including its placement, size, layout, angle, colour, explicit (or implicit) messaging, light setting, and associated compositions. These photographic nuances are a critical part of the whole image delivery. They help frame and visually contextualise the desired message that the media wish to communicate. Nonetheless, all images are prone to various interpretations. To aid one desired reading, the media use markers, socially recognised signs and symbols to help channel the specific message and its social meaning. These messages are developed within the technical engineering process of image production and often use stereotypical images of class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality that require little audience interpretation, as they are held to be immediately recognisable. This recognition is aided by
ensuring that the technical composition of the image is aesthetically pleasing, and that the content and context are clearly defined for direct audience insight to occur. In other words, images are objects that have 'been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed [and] treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms'. Thus, images undergo technical manipulation, not just to improve a final presentation, but also to ensure that the overall reproduction transmits a particular message or meaning to the audience.

Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd analyse sporting events where media techniques essentially create sporting theatricals. They maintain that glitz and glamour often overshadow the actual sport, such that professional ‘wrestling adopts the personal, social, and moral conflicts that characterized nineteenth-century theatrical melodrama’ (p. 53). Wrestling spectacles integrate bright colourful outfits, dramatic music, staged outbursts, and hype to spellbind their audiences. The mechanisms used to achieve this include live commentary, vivid colours, background music and close-ups. These entertain and enthral viewers. Media images are enhanced, contrasted, accentuated and framed to make the required statement, create the right effect, and to pass on the desired message. These techniques, commonly used in televised soap operas, are employed to personalise the action and are becoming more obvious in the sporting environment. Such techniques are seen to help create particular meaning and incorporate social and cultural messages. These messages are exhibited explicitly and implicitly within a range of manufactured images. The staged professional wrestling fights convey a number of social and cultural messages. The most obvious involve the integration of moral and ethical combat of good against evil. As Baker and Boyd put it, 'wrestling offers its viewers a story of justice perverted and restored, innocence misrecognized and recognized, strength used and abused' (p. 54).

In the fashion environment, advertisers use images to sell their products and to offer them as an 'ideal' which consumers must have. Tebbel maintains that the ideal feminine image has been creatively developed by manipulating images where 'faces and bodies are uniformly attractive, airbrushed to perfection' (p. 116). The use of technology to transform and re-present the original picture into the desired format has as much to do with power as with control. Power is established by developing images that influence consumers whilst simultaneously controlling the message behind the image. In the words of Jonathan Bignell, 'we identify with images of other people, like the images of beautiful models on the covers of women's magazines ... the connotation is that the reader can become like the model by using these products'. The magazine cover in particular is a powerful tool that not only entices women to purchase the magazine, but also creates the belief that the product advertised on the cover will make its female users more appealing, feminine and desirable. Women's magazines successfully link women’s self-esteem to the technically enhanced feminine images that they offer. Yet, the retouching, manipulation and airbrushing of models in photographs make an important statement about the actual reality that is on sale. The need for technical manipulation suggests a
level of unattainability. However, the techniques are so seamlessly effective that most readers are 'duped' into believing (or accepting) the authentic nature of the image.

Interestingly, many of the images that perpetuate these artificially constructed ideals are the creations of stock photography - generic images specifically manufactured for global advertising. Stock photography provides run-of-the-mill stock-standard images that have no tie to the final advertised product. They are created independently for global image sales and conform to a standard image format that can be used to represent a broad range of products. Their usage raises questions about both consumer naivety and media honesty as the advertised images bear no authentic relationship to the final advertised product. These manufactured relationships between media images and products are forged during the editing process rather than when the original image is captured. The media fabricate the atmosphere and mood with which the audience can identify. Photographs, as one-dimensional images of three-dimensional objects, are engineered to not only reflect the instant of inspiration, but also to manipulate, superimpose, and overlay objects and thus build the image into an emotive subject. The techniques that transform an image into a subject provide opportunities to re-present the original representation in any desired format. The mass production of still and moving images of sport and popular culture employs mechanisms that project the live experience outwards to an extended audience, who have access to and participate in this controlled media environment.

Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes examine how the media tailor and adapt traditional live public mass-entertainment, packaging their versions and transporting them into the cinema and ultimately into the living room. Sport and popular culture images experienced within private domains provide a unique sense of ownership and connection to the subject matter. This pervasiveness highlights how effective the relationship between the media, sport and the audience has become. The ability of moving and still images to captivate and inspire growing audiences has led to continual improvements in media technology. The better the quality of image, the more readily the contained message is taken up. Technologies such as the telephoto lens allow the audience to experience close-up images that enhance the visual aspects of 'being there'. Slow motion replays and paused action adds to the feeling of control and nearness that media image manipulation provides. The manipulation of images also relies on non-verbal signs and symbols. The media utilises mannerisms, expressions and physical gestures to visually help make the desired point. Thus, whether watching televised sport or glancing at a photograph in a newspaper or magazine, viewers are exposed to a number of visual cues to make a complete statement.

Baker and Boyd identify a range of sensory techniques that are used to create an overall visual impression. Personalised commentary provides the viewer with background details on the athlete, statistics, and the history of past encounters. Such commentary transforms the viewer into a symbolic 'insider',
one who has a deeper sense of appreciation and understanding. This appreciation encourages the viewer to maintain a close association, remaining informed and loyal to the athlete or their sport. The commentator becomes a kind of middleman (less frequently middle-woman) who actively promotes, markets and 'sells' the sporting event. Within all types of product marketing, 'advertising operates with signs intended to evoke certain kinds of emotions'.

These emotions are designed to link the image to a viewer’s experience thereby generating credibility and authenticity. A typical example is the beautiful, yet overly slim, blond female model wearing a glamorous body hugging dress, happily smiling at the handsome muscular man beside her in advertisements in women’s magazines. This manufactured image reflects not just the product on sale, the eveningwear, but also a number of social stereotypes - heterosexuality, female sexuality, and race, which the consumer typically accepts without question.

Consumers have become socialised into accepting images as products that are creatively merchandised at every opportunity. A multitude of businesses have evolved to both produce and utilise the new techniques of production, ensuring that the most realistic images are created and reproduced. As consumers of images, we are constantly bombarded with representations presented as the 'ideal' that supposedly echo social and cultural norms. These norms are replicated via images that the media endeavour to connect to typical social experiences. Richard Dyer analyses the way in which social experience is portrayed in mediated images, particularly in films, to communicate specific messages. He maintains that the characters in films perpetuate and accentuate accepted and normalised cultural and social ideals. Yet he also argues that culture itself is continually changing through the way in which images are presented, taken up, interpreted and re-interpreted. Dyer acknowledges that gender, power relations, age, past experience and upbringing all impact on how an individual interprets things. There is never one true or static reading of an image; at the very least one can expect that a woman’s perspective will differ from a man’s, or a teenager’s from an octogenarian’s.

Tebbel examines how techniques used in fashion magazines influence and manipulate social experience. This social manipulation is encouraged using images that 'persuade' viewers to interpret the content in a particular manner. This singular interpretation is the aim that media strive to develop and is creatively exploited in image manipulation where 'film works to create an illusion of reality, photography operates like an hallucination'. As an effective advertising tool, women experience this hallucination as a continual confrontation of the ideal feminine body image, where magazines, television advertisements and films market it to represent health, beauty and a recipe for success. Tebbel argues that 'the brutal truth is that women’s magazines exist primarily to coach their readers to become loyal consumers' (p. 110).
process of steering consumers, through the production and development of particular images, highlights how important the process of technical image manipulation is for the media. Advertising power and success lies in ensuring that the image draws the reader into identifying with and accepting its message and worth. Individuals are socialised into evaluating the worthiness of something on the basis of what they superficially see rather than what they personally experience.

**Image and the Social Construction of Meaning of Masculinity, Femininity and Sexuality**

Visual appeal is both a process of socially constructing a product whilst simultaneously influencing the consumer to see the product in a particular light. The social environment is thus influenced by, and influences, the reception and delivery of the image. Media delivery cultivates individual and community interests, likes and dislikes, and helps develop broad ideological and political perspectives. The media influence these perspectives through the manner and format of the information that it distributes. As highlighted in the previous section, media influence is strongly dependent on a variety of techniques that positively encourage and captivate audiences by visual stimulation. Yet these manipulative techniques provide insight only into what is done, not why, or how, society takes onboard the particular meanings. For images to be meaningful, the complex layers of messages contained within need to be expounded. Audiences must identify with and understand the context of the representative image for it to be accepted. Creating this understanding and acceptance is one of the core initiatives that the professional media worker focuses on. Because image makes the first impression, through audience recognition, it is a primary power tool. Tebbel maintains that 'the self-esteem of young women plummets each time they read a fashion magazine and discover they may never have what it takes to be considered a real woman' (p. 13). The production of this 'real woman' image is then commercially marketed, as an achievable ideal and the unsuspecting consumer is influenced into constantly reflecting on her own self-image. In turn, the perpetual reflection on this idealised image helps entrench it as socially normal. It is precisely these meanings and messages that the media effectively exploit to build awareness of the social norms that they effectively portray. Readily identifiable social and cultural images influence society well beyond pure merchandising and product sales.

Televised media images provide live and reproduced images of sport and popular culture. Baker and Boyd argue that televised sporting experiences create a rich relationship between enterprise and entertainment and pervasively lure the viewer into reproducing dominant values. They identify the production and delivery of sporting images as critical to perpetuating dominant masculine values. This is achieved using invigorating and impressive moving and still images of sportsmen that highlight the natural 'fit' of sport and man. These images help create the belief that participation in, and
consumption of, sport is the embodiment of masculinity. Thus the media effectively project the inherent 'masculine ideal' of sport and perpetuate it by using sporting images, signs and symbols that are socially representative of sporting manhood. And it is not only in relation to sport that male interests are given priority. The media tends to focus on issues that men are interested in - 'power, politics, war, economics, sport and law, where male interests are conflated with human interests'. This reinforces the impressions that male issues are superior to those which interest females, as the media focuses on male interests first and foremost. In the case of sport, the message of authority and superiority is achieved through images that convey the impression that masculine strength, power and achievement is what is socially expected. The stereotypical media image focuses on men and male sports as the genuine event, the original, the real McCoy.

Boyle and Haynes suggest that 'media sport is a powerful context for the representation of gender identity, and men’s place in the world is often framed, one way or another, by their interest or lack of interest in sport ... sport is heavily laden with values of maleness' (p. 135). The media define this value by depicting sportsmen and their accomplishments in a reverential manner. Through the respect and recognition given to them by the sporting media, sportsmen have become heroes and new-age warriors. These role models and sporting celebrities are the pin-up poster idols that every boy aspires to replicate, and every girl admires. The close-up of the sporting hero's smile adorns motorway billboards; advertisers queue up to sponsor and purchase the right to use images of stars at every marketable opportunity. In contrast to this sporting masculine reflection, female athletes face significant barriers in accessing not only equal media coverage but also social recognition and respect for their sporting achievements. This has meant that 'much of the emergent cultural imagery of women’s sport is relegated to the margins of the mass media, thus leaving the masculine centre mostly intact'.

When media images do focus on sportswomen, they tend to highlight the aesthetic, frivolous, and feminine traits rather than the overtly sporting ones. Sportswomen only stand on 'centre-stage when they can be appreciated and exploited for [their] sexual appeal. Otherwise, they are relegated to the margins of the cultural radar screen'. The constant undermining, marginalising and trivialising of female sporting achievement helps project the impression that sportswomen are less important than their male counterparts. When women do get media attention, much of it is for the wrong reasons. Media images have tended to focus on female athletes' breasts, bare legs and buttocks at the expense of, and disregard for, women's sporting abilities. This disregard is particularly evident in images that sexually exploit elite sportswomen such as that seen in the Australian sport magazine Inside Sport where sportswomen are frequently seen in apparel and contexts that are totally unrelated to their sport or athletic abilities. In addition to this 'exploitation', the media allocates little space to the physically active sportswoman. It also bears noting that World Cup sporting events require no gender precursor for male events as the
audience is socialised into understanding that World Cup denotes men’s competition. It only becomes necessary to add gender labels when the event involves women, such as the Women’s World Cup Soccer. This distinction again highlights the stereotypical socially constructed impressions that sport is all about men and women’s sport is secondary to the ’real’ thing. By providing a barrage of all-male sports coverage, the viewer is socially acclimatised into believing that this is the way it should be and is normal and acceptable practice.

The social construction of meaning is examined by Aaron Baker to determine how the media have effectively popularised and dramatised American sports in film. This form of entertainment has become increasingly appealing and invasive, eroding traditional barriers between the realm of private and public experiences. Baker argues that the mass appeal of film, although seemingly unassuming at first glance, actually provides an opportunity to transmit deeper and more subversive messages than entertainment for entertainments sake. He maintains that this genre of entertainment 'contributes to the contested process of defining social identities' as sports films focus on the innate masculine nature of sport (p. 2). Films capture this masculine sentiment using signs and symbols that positively reinforce male superiority, strength, power, and manhood. Sportswomen in films have traditionally been captured more as scenic extras; images complying with a feminine code of aesthetic beauty and frailty to contrast gender differences and to socially reinforce sports natural masculine identity.

Baker and Boyd examine American sports participation of athletes (both male and female) in aggressive mass-spectator sports such as boxing and wrestling, where the negative reaction to female participation is highlighted. Using the rhetoric of white, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity as the normative barometer, they assess how all ‘other’ identities within sport and popular culture are evaluated and measured using this value-laden yardstick. In examining the historic and social evolution of American sporting cultures, Baker and Boyd highlight not only issues of gender but also the assimilation of immigrant groups into American sports. Media communication in sport is seen to subtly, yet effectively, capture and convey patriotic meanings, especially within American mediated sport. They describe how commentary and image encourages xenophobia. Non-America wrestling characters are cast as the 'enemy' and the ownership of American sports teams by non-Americans, especially by the Japanese, is projected negatively by the American media.

Boyle and Haynes analyse the social, cultural and political nature of the mediated image. They maintain that the political nature of images used by the media are never made explicit, but are always implicit. Within sport they argue that 'few other cultural forms lend themselves as easily as sport to being used as an indicator of certain national characteristics and, by extension, of being representative of a national identity' (p. 143). Boyle and Haynes focus on how the media creatively construct the content of information on sport and popular culture to suit a particular audience. Journalists specialise in one or
two sports and structure their coverage ensuring it maintains the dominant stereotypical notions about gender, race, national identity, and competition. They suggest that ‘the media, television and the press in particular, are playing a central role in producing, reproducing and amplifying many of the discourses associated with sport in the modern world’ (p. 8). This includes producing images that link international sporting success with national pride and superiority.

In *The Matter of Images*, Dyer highlights how film has become a medium to convey social practices either positively or negatively. Film characters emphasise characteristics in particular ways so that those deemed socially negative - such as homosexuality - are reflected as different, deviant and immoral. Media techniques reinforce social and cultural norms by projecting stereotypical images to imply both acceptability and unacceptability. These representations perpetuate a cycle that reflects positive social norms in a favourable light and all others in a more negative or unacceptable manner. Dyer reveals how gay film noir indirectly uses images where the overemphasis of mannerisms, dress and styles generate disapproval. Additionally, social meaning is derived from such accompaniments as heavy lighting, dramatic music, and other aberrant mechanisms. Baker and Boyd examine techniques used in sport that express similar meaning. In the case of professional wrestling, the audience and the wrestlers’ respond negatively to the foppish mannerisms and persona of the Beverley brothers in lavender tights. They become the target for anti-gay sentiment and aggression. The wrestling characters are technically constructed around looks, attitudes, and mannerisms that positively reflect American heterosexual masculinity as the accepted ideal. The non-American and non-masculine characters face the aggression and hostility of both the other wrestlers and the audience.

In sporting contexts, other than professional wrestling, mediated images reflect a similar masculine heterosexual standpoint. Sport and sexuality is a controversial and much debated topic. The media play an instrumental role in this debate due to the types of images, signs, symbols and messages that they produce for public consumption. Additionally and perhaps more importantly, the mass media have decisively taken traditionally private issues and cast them into the public domain. This social ‘outing’ of a range of personal information has created concern and discussion around the invasion of privacy by the media. Films, television, and magazines capture the private lives of celebrities and make them available for public scrutiny. Additionally, the media communicate their own interpretation of the information and use images that evoke similar reading.

Sportswomen who participate in stereotypical ‘male’ sports or who look more masculine, receive negative or limited media coverage. Images that appear to reflect muscular strength in sportswomen often raise questions about the athletes’ sexuality. Historically, mediated sports that were regarded as masculine - boxing, bodybuilding, rugby and cricket - offered limited coverage of female participation. Where the media do cover female events they

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are framed by feminine imagery; sportswomen appeared in non-action images with children, husbands or boyfriends to counter any doubts about their heterosexuality. The media thus tend to emphasise feminine features wherever possible or link the image textually or image-wise to the safety of heterosexuality. Today, 'the guardians of sexuality still demand that sportswomen prove their femininity. And feminine remains code for heterosexual'. In this respect, the media are able to powerfully influence not just what images are reproduced, but also how the image is conveyed to deliver particular meaning. This conveyancing aids in constructing and projecting social norms that the dominant, masculine group considers appropriate.

Conclusion

The authors of the reviewed books all recognise a close relationship between the technical developments within still and moving imagery and the growth of mass media communication. Yet, the mechanisms developed within the technical media evolution to produce image has gone far beyond merely providing a pure re-presentation of the original. Darkroom techniques used to engineer images raise questions about media intent, where the manipulation is not just about image modification but is also instrumental in social modification. Media images effectively channel social norms to a captive audience. It is not only a matter of what is communicated, but more specifically how information is transmitted that makes the difference. The media reflect behaviour, mannerisms, activities and practices either positively or negatively to make the required social statements. Much of what viewers experience as reality through the media needs to be considered in its broadest context. This context is heavily influenced by the strong interdependency of global media broadcasting and sport and popular culture activities. This influence has seen images of sport, sports personalities and popular culture being marketed and merchandised to encourage escalating consumerism. Although consumers are provided with increased access to products, information and global news, the media's controlling role in selecting the content and context of this communication is limiting. These limits stem from 'the process[es] of reporting, editing, composing, [that] take us progressively further from the news source'. The media produce their own version of world reality, which most viewers readily accept as the ultimate truth without recognising it as just one interpretation of the facts. Media content relies heavily on the audience identifying with and accepting the images that the media interpret, manipulate and re-produce.

Individuals are socialised into automatically accepting the re-produced and pre-interpreted image at face value. The media communicate images that incorporate culturally accepted signs and symbols to make the content and context more personal and meaningful. Image production has become extremely invasive, capturing private moments and making them public property. Global communication influences not only the way in which we
view ourselves but how the rest of the world is perceived. Through technical manipulation value-laden images are projected in close-ups, in slow motion-replay, from heights and angles that generate meaning, in various sizes, in colour and in black-and-white. Each of these aspects enhances the message that the media wishes to communicate. Each frame is developed to highlight something in particular, manufactured by the media to be recognised as a true (or believable) reflection of social reality.

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**Endnotes**


7. Creed, *Media Matrix*, p. 216. In her words, 'film can yoke together disparate images to create atmosphere, mood, sensation, eroticism, desire'.


