



## Men, Masculinities, and Media: Some Introductory Notes

By Jackson Katz



The climactic scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Toto pulls back the curtain to reveal a nervous, tragic man pretending to be the Great and Powerful Oz represents more than just a classic moment in American cinematic history. It is also a powerful metaphor for looking at masculinity in a new way: not as a fixed, inevitable, natural state of being, but rather as a projection, a performance, a mask that men often wear to shield our vulnerability and hide our humanity.

In fact, the poses we strike and the images we create can tell us a great deal about what's going on in individual men's lives, and in our culture as a whole. That's why it is important for us to pull back the curtain and take a sober look – both at the images themselves and what's behind them.

These images tell a story – actually part of a story – about what's been happening with American men over the past generation. The last quarter of the 20th century has been marked by rapid and seismic changes in gender and sexual relations. In the brave new world in which we live, at the dawn of the 21st century, these changes have created new life experiences and identities for whole generations of women and men. It has been well-documented that the enormous baby boom generation catalyzed the modern multicultural women's movement, which is one of the key transformative social movements in the history of the human species.

Young people in the U.S. who came of age in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, including the younger boomers, Generation X, and the so-called millennial generation, are the first generations to have grown up with this movement, not simply to have reacted to it, but literally to have grown up with it. Consequently, many young men of all races and ethnicities have embraced new notions of sexual equality, and are pioneering new ways of being in egalitarian relationships with women, as friends, lovers and husbands, classmates, colleagues, and fellow workers.

Not surprisingly, however, some men have reacted very poorly to these changes. It's not just in extreme movements in foreign cultures – like the Taliban

in Afghanistan – where we can see male backlash played out. Many U.S. men, of varying class and racial backgrounds, have been decentered and threatened by women's increased assertions of strength, integrity, and social and economic power. One manifestation of the backlash is the pandemic rates of violence perpetrated by men and boys against women and girls, rates that have persisted despite decades of feminist antiviolence activism.

Through all of this momentous social change, a proliferation of mass media images has helped structure the way we think and react to the shifting gender terrain. The post-sixties generations are immersed in a world of media imagery whose scope and variety is, to say the least, historically unprecedented. The bottom line: if you want to understand what's going on with contemporary American masculinities, you have to look at what's going on in the media.

Over the past few decades, cultural theorists such as Raymond Williams (Williams, 1981) have argued that while it's people who produce the images that bombard us daily on tv, on billboards, in video games and in film, it is equally true to say that this virtual landscape of images, in some sense, produces us. This means that we're not just consumers of these images; we don't simply make our way through the thousands of images we see daily and pick and choose what we like and don't like. These images have a profound impact on who we are, and on our tastes, attitudes, and the kinds of choices we make.

Feminists who have analyzed media content to date have primarily focused on images of women, and what we can learn from them about women's lives. This is crucial and important work. But until recently there has been relatively little attention paid to images of men.

Consider the pioneering feminist media literacy work of Jean Kilbourne (Kilbourne, 1979), or the work of Naomi Wolf (Wolf, 1991) on western constructions of female beauty. As these and other feminist theorists and activists have long maintained, images of women's bodies as represented in the mainstream media are thinner, more waifish, and younger than

women's bodies in the real world. Showing women this way is a means of symbolically taking power away from them, because thin, waifish women literally take up less space in the world, and hence are less threatening. These images, feminists remind us, are flooding the visual landscape at a time when women are challenging traditional male power on many different fronts.

Only in the past decade, as queer theorists and profeminist men's studies scholars have taken up the subject, has there been any significant attention paid to how men's bodies are represented and what that suggests about recent developments in men's lives.<sup>ii</sup> It is axiomatic that for every story about women's lives, there is a corresponding story about men's. For example, while image of women have been thinner and more waifish, images of men have gotten bigger, stronger, more muscular, and more violent. What accounts for this?

Young men for the past several decades have been challenged by women in areas that our fathers and grandfathers never were—in education, the workplace, business, the professions. But one area where men as a group continue to assume they have a significant advantage over women as a group is in the area of physical size and strength. As a result, physical size and strength for many men have become increasingly important to proving manhood. This is borne out by a review of changes over the past generation in the body morphology of male action film stars, the musculature of the dolls that young boys play with, as well as the exaggerated strutting and posing of many rock and rap performers.

Tough guy posing, even though it's often just an act, also has the effect of keeping men in line. Fed by a constant stream of images informed by the Marlboro Man ethos of the "real man" as a stoic rugged individualist, millions of boys and men learn early on that acting like a man means you don't complain, you don't admit weakness, you don't ever let others see the anxious man behind the curtain. This sort of conditioning starts very young, as does the pressure on boys and young men to compete—in school,

in sports, in their social milieu—to live up to their fathers' visions of them as manly men.

But the pretense of omnipotence and invulnerability that is implied by ubiquitous images of physically powerful males is not just emotionally stultifying. It also gets a lot of men—and boys—killed. Richard Majors and Janet Billson have examined one angle of this phenomenon with their concept of "cool pose" (Majors, 1992). The cool pose is a style affected by poor urban Black males who have few resources (middle-class income or the expectation of one, education, workplace authority, social status) to earn respect as men beyond their bodies, and their ability to strike a pose of "cool," "badness," or violence.

But it's not just poor Black males and other men of color who fall into a hypermasculine posture to compensate for their disadvantages in other areas of life. Poor and working-class white men are also denied opportunities available to more privileged middle-class males. White suburban, middle-class males are the leading purchasers of rap music, including misogynous gangsta rap; these young men take poses that grow out of mean city street culture and adopt them to their lives in relatively (at least superficially) nonviolent suburban communities.

Over the past 10 or 15 years, there has been an outpouring of scholarship, books, articles, and discussion about masculinities, the gendered nature of men's lives, and how men have and have not adjusted to the changes catalyzed by feminism. This work has accelerated the long-term feminist project of shining the spotlight on the intimate workings of the dominant group, men. The purpose is not to push women aside and put men back on center stage, but to understand the ways that male dominance functions in the hope that this understanding can hasten the process of breaking down sexual inequality and improving the lives of women and men.

Furthering our understanding of the ways that media imagery helps shape the construction of masculinities is a critical part of this effort. The more we can, like Toto, deflate the power of

the unrealistic images that dominate our visual and psychic landscapes, the better we'll be able to face honestly the ongoing challenges of our time.

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## Footnotes

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i. As the sociologist Bob Connell (1997) and others have argued, "masculinity" as a singular construct does not account for the differences in power among groups of men (e.g. men of different classes, races, and sexual orientations). For the purpose of this essay I use "masculinity" to refer to individual men's sense of their own gender, and "masculinities" to refer to structures in the larger gender order.

ii. One of the first educational videos to examine images of masculinity was *Stale Roles and Tight Buns: Images of Men in Advertising* (1984), by the OASIS collective in Boston, MA.

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