

Book Reviews

L Davis, *The Swimsuit Issue and Sport: Hegemonic Masculinity in Sports Illustrated*. State University of New York, Albany, 1997. pp. 168.

Swimsuit models featuring in sporting magazines are nothing new to Australia. *Inside Sport* and *Total Sport* currently use these models prominently to attract heterosexual male readers. Debates over the depiction of these models are common.¹ Do swimsuit models represent sexist imagery that degrades women and the activities of female athletes? Do they have a place in a sporting magazine? Are the photo spreads pornographic? Or are they simply legitimate, harmless images designed to attract 'red-blooded' men? These questions highlight what *The Swimsuit Issue and Sport* analyses: the public struggle over the cultural meanings of swimsuit models featuring in a popular, widely available sporting publication.

As a feminist, Laura Davis adopts an empirical media studies approach in examining the annual American swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*. Davis theoretically underpins her study with Robert Connell's concepts of the gender order and hegemonic masculinity.² Methodologically, interviews are conducted with consumers, producers, advertisers, and models involved with the swimsuit issue; while pictorials, articles, letters, calendars, and television are all analysed. This method provides a thorough and necessary study of both media production and consumption processes. In terms of content, Davis traces the historical evolution of the swimsuit issue from fashion and travel articles and advertisements, to specifically swimsuit model pictorials. She then goes on in following chapters to examine whether the swimsuit issue represents sexism, heterosexism, racism and ethnocentrism. In all this, Davis never loses sight of the fact that such social and cultural issues are often at odds with the economic motives of the producers of the swimsuit issue.

The greatest strength of *The Swimsuit Issue and Sport* is its empirical basis. The research is extensive and the numerous interviews conducted for this study ground its analysis. Indeed, the empirical approach should serve as an excellent example for an Australian study of Australian sporting magazines. The interview process highlights the importance of socio-cultural and/or socio-economic background in influencing how an individual reads a text. A well-executed and integral feature of Davis's book is the discussion of differences and similarities between the swimsuit issue and the genres of pornography, pin-ups, art and advertising. Davis's argument that the swimsuit issue represents a 'hegemonic masculine

text' rather than a 'sporting text' is well grounded, analysed and articulated. Overall, Davis ably highlights that the realm of popular culture is central to the constitution and negotiation of important and complex gender relations that have far reaching effects on social relations.

There are shortcomings in Davis's *The Swimsuit Issue*. Detailed discussion of Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is not introduced until well into the study (p. 53), which is confusing considering that the term hegemonic masculinity is used in the title of the book. A short introductory chapter or section on Connell's framework is warranted. When Connell is introduced there is little, if any, critical discussion of Connell's work, which leaves the reader with little idea of the strengths and weaknesses of the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Such discussion is justifiable considering the centrality of hegemonic masculinity to the study. Also, while Davis's arguments are mostly well grounded, they occasionally involve sweeping generalisations and subjective editorial comment. A standout example is in chapter 8 when she states that token representation of black models in the swimsuit issue shows that the producers 'really do not care' about people of colour. Such a sweeping statement lacks context and is little more than speculation. Further to this, the conclusion asserts reductively that 'what we really need to do is abolish the gender ideals of masculinity and femininity altogether'. Proposing that gender ideals be abolished altogether simply fails to offer any practical measures and/or solutions to challenge the dominance of masculine hegemony.

The criticisms detailed above do not alter that fact that Davis's study remains very important reading for anyone seeking to understand gender relations in the media. It traverses difficult terrain in analysing cultural meaning in and through the representation of gender in popular culture. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that it examines the swimsuit issue of the *American Sports Illustrated*, its relevance in the Australian context is little diminished. Davis's findings, in many cases, are relevant when considering our own sporting magazines. It is for this reason in particular that *The Swimsuit Issue and Sport* resonates with generally compelling analysis and insights.

Brett Hutchins

Department of Human Movement Studies
The University of Queensland

NOTES:

- 1 See, for example, the *Sports Factor* program, Radio National, 20 Feb. 1997.
- 2 R W Connell, *Gender and Power*, Polity, Cambridge, 1987; R W Connell, *Masculinities*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995.