

## All-consuming images: new gender formations in post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland

DEBBIE GING

‘We learn to think of our desires in terms of the commodities produced to meet them, we learn to think of our problems in terms of the commodities by which to solve them.’ (John Fiske, 1990: 182)

Over the past ten years, conspicuously new images of and discourses on gender have appeared in Irish shopping malls, on Irish billboards, in the Irish news and entertainment media and on the shelves of Irish bookshops. Radio shows, television programmes, online chat-rooms, magazines, daily newspapers and self-help books are all increasingly populated by a range of new male and female typologies: from new men, new lads and metrosexuals to domestic goddesses, desperate housewives and yummy mummies. This chapter looks at how the recent rise in consumerism is affecting the ways in which we mediate and talk about gender behaviours, identities and relationships in contemporary Ireland. It maps out a number of key debates in contemporary gender studies and considers how the changes discussed here are likely to affect Irish society unless proactive measures are taken to ensure a more egalitarian gender order. Many of the developments discussed here, enmeshed as they are in global cultural processes, are not specific to Ireland. However, their reception in and impact on a society which, like all others, has its own history of gender relations, and thus its own unique ‘gender-scape’, is of obvious concern to anyone with an interest in social and cultural change in Ireland.

The changes addressed here are the result of a number of mutually compatible developments, the most noteworthy of which are: firstly, the decline in western societies of second-wave feminism and its replacement with a broadly post-feminist cultural discourse (Tasker and Negra, 2007);

secondly, the growing popularity of bio-determinist discourses on gender;<sup>1</sup> and thirdly, the move towards an increasingly commercial media-scape. Although recent statistics on gender in Ireland and the rest of Europe point to significant equality deficits,<sup>2</sup> a new (liberal) discourse of progress has emerged in relation to gender in post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland which has little to do with material (in)equality or the representation of citizens in the public sphere. Within this new rhetoric, freedom is understood less as the legacy of second-wave feminism and increasingly as something given to us by an open, liberal market, which celebrates female empowerment in the form of ‘girl power’, is inclusive of sexual diversity and ironises the antiquated sexism of a bygone era. Indeed, as this chapter will demonstrate, much recent debate about gender in Ireland is underpinned – both implicitly and explicitly – by the assumption that equality is a *fait accompli* and that feminism’s work is done. However, contrary to the justifiable assumption that such a climate of post-feminism might render gender issues less prevalent in popular imagery and discourse, the opposite is in fact the case. In recent years the popular media have displayed a near hysteria with the obsolescence of gender equality on the one hand, while actively reviving a ‘war-of-the-sexes’ discourse on the other.

In tandem with this development, ironic sexism and stereotypes have made a spectacular comeback in the entertainment media, with large-breasted, pouting babes in hotpants at one end of the spectrum and emotionally challenged hard men hell-bent on the adolescent pleasures of ‘Lad-land’ (cars, soccer, beer, gangsters and pornography) at the other. This repolarisation of gender identities is particularly evident in the dominance of an aggressive but allegedly ironic ‘gender war’ rhetoric, which pervades all aspects of media culture, from advertising copy to radio quizzes: women and men are pitted against one another in a bid to see, it would seem, which set of stereotypical traits is ‘better’. The irony underpinning this new, brash sexism lies in the claim that the stereotyping of women as obsessive shoppers or shoe fetishists and of men as domestically inept, relationship-averse larger-louts is so blatant and so passé that we can now laugh at its anachronisms. This, however, is where the paradoxes of the irony argument begin: because precisely this type of essentialist thinking about gender is now emerging in more serious fora, which serve not only to challenge social construction theory but also to rationalise and justify the gender stereotypes that contemporary advertising both lampoons and simultaneously reaffirms.

Gender has become an increasingly popular prism through which to view a broad range of contemporary social ills, many of which might be better explained by using other analytical variables, such as class, ethnicity or sexuality. Thus, suicide, anti-social behaviour and academic under-

achievement are increasingly discussed in male-versus-female – rather than in class-based – terms. In addition to this centre-staging of gender is another striking development, namely the growing prevalence of essentialist or bio-determinist accounts of gender difference. This is increasingly evident not only in the ostensibly ironic gender stereotyping that has become a key feature of popular cultural imagery but also in serious media debates about male disadvantage, fathers' rights, domestic violence, childcare and anti-social behaviour. Brain size, serotonin, testosterone, endorphins, bipolarity and synaptic connections are terms no longer confined to the specialist lexicons of psychiatry, neuroscience or biochemistry but have become the staple fodder of discussions about men, women and the relationships between them on a host of popular daytime talk shows and phone-in radio programmes. To take just a few examples:

Biologically, whether feminists like it or not, boys are genetically more disposed than girls to achieve academically. On average, men's brains are 15 per cent larger than women's, which is roughly twice the difference in physical proportions. (John Waters, *Irish Times*, 27 August 2001)

We have forgotten that social structure is what protects males from the volatility of their nature.... The young males of all primate species indulge in heart-stopping risk-taking and experimentation.... The peak of aggressiveness and antisocial behaviour occurs in the late teens and early 20s, corresponding to the peak of testosterone at that age. (Maureen Gaffney, *Irish Times*, 28 February 2004)

It's a woman's primary role to nurture.... Women by temperament are more caring, more forgiving, more tolerant and have a greater empathy with the children that they have given life to. (Eamon Dunphy, *Ryan Tubridy Morning Show*, 7 December 2006)

These commentators are not exceptional voices: their opinions and the discursive parameters within which they are framed are part of a much wider shift towards essentialist thinking in science, therapy and popular culture (Rosalind Gill, 2003: 50–1) that is characteristic of most advanced capitalist societies today. According to Maija Holmer Nadesan:

More recently, the public has been bombarded with a 'scientific' discourse that implies a bio-genetic essentialism through its explication of phenomena such as intelligence, sexuality and aggression as neural-biological outcomes of genetic factors affected by natural selection. (Holmer Nadesan 2002: 403)

Why, however, is this prioritisation of the biological over the social so attractive and conducive to a neoliberal economy? For Holmer Nadesan, the objectives and outcomes of such a discursive shift are clear: because

'the discourse of "brain science" renders populations visible in new ways', it enables them to be problematised and subsequently dealt with in a manner that legitimises the extension of governmentality over potentially threatening populations. Thus, hyperactive children can be managed with Ritalin rather than through radical changes to diet, parenting or state-supported services. Depression, conceived of as a chemical imbalance, can be addressed through quick-fix medication rather than through costly and time-consuming qualitative research on how the pressures of modern life affect people's sense of self-worth. Similarly, biochemical explanations for criminality, particularly in relation to young men, can be used to justify heightened surveillance and tougher jail sentences, while the social causes of male marginalisation are ignored.

Besides fostering complex and ostensibly non-invasive forms of governmentality, however, it is important to recognise that 'brain science' is inextricably bound up in the logic of everyday consumerism.<sup>3</sup> This is well illustrated by an article written by psychologist Maureen Gaffney in the *Irish Times* magazine, in which she claims that women fall in love with shoes and handbags not because they have been relentlessly objectified by western visual culture for hundreds of years or aggressively targeted by modern advertising since its inception, but because they are 'fulfilling their evolutionary destiny' (Gaffney, 2007a). According to Gaffney, women in early human societies:

specialised in child rearing, nesting and foraging for food, while males hunted for meat and defended their territory. By necessity women evolved to have better peripheral vision than men, enabling them to see in a wider arc and monitor any danger approaching the nest or any subtle changes in the environment.

She goes on to explain that these sensory skills make women:

avid and effective foragers of luxury goods.... Women lovingly fondle silk and cashmere, sniff perfume with a look of rapt attention on their faces, and talk about colours such as taupe and eau de nil.

In Ireland, as in Britain and the United States, the shift towards neo-liberal government and its concurrent commercialisation of the media-scape have been key drivers in facilitating the discursive and representational repolarisation of gender. The trajectory from a public-service broadcasting model to one whose core objective is to sell audiences to advertisers sets up an entirely new dynamic between the broadcast media and their audiences. As well as marginalising those demographic groups that are of little interest to advertisers, this model addresses consumers in increasingly

gender-reductive ways. This is particularly evident in the growth of gender-specific cultural genres such as chick-lit, chick-flicks and lad mags, as well as in the way television programming is becoming increasingly organised around the marketing not only of gender-specific products but also of new, gender-specific viewing contexts. The launch of Channel 6 (now 3e), Ireland's first dedicated entertainment channel, is a case in point. Aimed at a core audience of fifteen- to thirty-four-year-olds, the station made clear the gendered niche markets it intended to deliver to advertisers. 'Boys Night' on a Tuesday evening was sponsored by Paddy Power bookmakers and featured the usual line-up of job- and relationship-averse, yet sex- and soccer-hungry, 'losers' (Messner and Montez de Oca, 2005) who have come to characterise 'Guyland' (Kimmel, 2008). 'Girls Night', on the other hand, was dominated by programmes such as *Dharma and Greg* and *Sex and The City*, with product-placement inserts showing female friends giggling and enjoying low-calorie sparkling drinks together.<sup>4</sup> As Andrew Wernick (1991) has commented, the market has become the core organising principle of social life, giving rise to increasingly diffuse and convoluted forms of promotional communication. Channel 6/3e exemplifies what Wernick refers to as promotional culture: it is not just the ads that are selling lifestyles, brands and identities but rather the entire televisual 'supertext' (Browne, 1987).

The formats supported by commercial media, therefore, are highly conducive to the use of simplified images and sound-bites. Ideas, on the other hand, which challenge common-sense assumptions are generally not media-friendly, since they require complex foregrounding and contextualisation (Herman and Chomsky, 1994). This partly explains why so much entertainment media space is currently taken up with the vox-pop 'surveys' and diluted snippets of deeply flawed yet highly accessible and apparently objective scientific 'facts' that fuel the jokey, blokey antagonism characteristic of the rapport between male radio jocks and their female side-kicks. However, the complexity and media-unfriendliness of the alternatives are not the only reasons why genetic-determinist ideas have succeeded in assuming such a central, even banal, position in Irish social discourse. Not only does the shift towards a 'liberal' gender-scape justify new forms of governmentality and generate highly lucrative markets in the sex, fashion, cosmetics and children's toy industries, but it also frequently serves to free the state from assuming its responsibilities in promoting gender equality, in tackling the problems associated with social exclusion and in safeguarding children. The remainder of this chapter seeks to demonstrate in detail how free-market economics have conspired with a broadly post-feminist culture to support a distinctly neoliberal political agenda on gender which, beneath its liberal rhetoric, is both deeply regressive and potentially highly coercive.

## The post-feminist paradox

Neoliberals, unlike conservatives, understand only too well that reactionary interventions are not required to get reactionary results. Global market forces, when left to their own devices, will ensure that the worldview of a powerful minority becomes normative: in other words, that the most reductive and most lucrative discursive constructions of gender will prevail. While these are generally also the most conservative ones, a number of key social and cultural shifts have occurred which ensure that they come packaged in a discourse of progress, empowerment and free choice. The most significant development of the past twenty years has been the trajectory from a feminist to a post-feminist framing of gender issues. This paradigm shift is colossal, not only because it represents a new set of assumptions about gender but also because it has effectively relocated the discursive arena within which these assumptions are addressed, from the realm of the political to that of the cultural (Tasker and Negra, 2007). According to Tasker and Negra (2007: 1), 'Postfeminism broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the "pastness" of feminism, whether that supposed "pastness" is merely noted, mourned or celebrated'. They go on to explain that 'Postfeminism does not always offer a logically coherent account of gender and power but through structures of forceful articulation and synergistic reiteration across media forms it has emerged as a dominating discursive system' (2007: 2–3). Unlike second-wave feminism, therefore, post-feminism cannot be understood either as a distinct mode of political activism or as a coherently developed ideology, but rather as a set of discursive responses – often serving contradictory agendas – to the perceived successes and failures of feminism.

Post-feminist culture is characterised by number of key developments. The first and most visible of these is its capitulation on feminism's rejection of the sexual objectification of women. This is defended using a number of arguments – men are also objectified, regressive portrayals of women are ironic, feminism robbed women of their 'innate' femininity – some of which suggest a return to essentialist concepts of gender identity and most of which are deeply enmeshed within the logic of consumer capitalism and commodity fetishism (Ging, 2007). One outcome of this *volte-face* is that women no longer need to be liberated from the cosmetics and fashion industries, since freedom, in the post-feminist scheme of things, is most readily expressed in terms of the ability to consume, as L'Oréal's ubiquitous advertising campaign so frequently reminds us ('because you're worth it'). Perhaps the most important defining feature of post-feminism, however, is the widespread acceptance of the myth that gender equality

has been won, in spite of the fact that Irish women continue to be under-represented in politics, industry and the professions, and continue to earn less than men (Central Statistics Office, 2006). Indeed, it is upon this optimistic rhetoric of the 'level playing field' (McMahon, 1999) that many of the more flagrant inequities and contradictions of the contemporary gender-scape are often justified. Now that what is (re)imagined as a harsh, humourless feminism is past, the dual discourses of equality and empowerment facilitate a more flexible and playful discussion of gender: it has thus become acceptable to claim that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, to view lap-dancing as liberating or to assume that women retreat from public life on the basis of empowered choices. At the level of cultural representation, which, as Tasker and Negra (2007) rightly point out, is post-feminism's central discursive arena, this has brought about a proliferation of images of women as variously self-indulgent, narcissistic, irrational, hypersexualised and often violent creatures who conflate pornography with freedom and consumerism with self-worth.

Finally, post-feminist culture tends to be underpinned by a post-modern aesthetics of parody, pastiche and irony (Whelehan, 2000; Tasker and Negra, 2007), which is by no means coincidental. As Whelehan (2000) has so cogently illustrated, using irony to underscore post-feminist culture's many contradictions and 'trouble spots' has served as a useful escape clause against claims of sexism, elitism and gender essentialism. It is against this particular cultural, political and economic backdrop that the mainstreaming of a pornographic aesthetic has been possible in Ireland: the Wonderbra phenomenon, which stirred up a degree of controversy in the early 1990s, has since been widely appropriated by Irish advertising agencies to sell everything from yoghurt to holidays. Scantly clad women drape themselves over cars at the annual 'Toys 4 Big Boys' exhibition at the RDS (Royal Dublin Society Exhibition Centre), in the style of 1970s soft pornography. Posters in third-level institutes of education advertising everything from hiking clubs to debating society events feature wide-eyed, pouting females in bikinis. Post-feminism gives us a fun take on porn, premised upon the notion that a minority of humourless, embittered feminists lost out to a more open-minded and progressive lobby.

It is important to point out, however, that this analysis does not assume a top-down, 'hypodermic needle' model of media influence. We cannot conclude, simply because certain discourses and images have become widespread, popular or accepted, that they are being interpreted or used in uniform ways. As strategies for the advancement of gender equality go, 'girl power' may be a deeply flawed concept, but that is not to say it does not help many pre-pubescent and adolescent females to negotiate some of

the limitations imposed on them by traditional, more passive models of femininity. As Flanagan and Booth (2002: 3) have pointed out in relation to the new images of hypersexualised and often violent femininity that prevail in cyberspace, the discursive terrain of popular culture is 'a space in which there is oppression as well as room for tactical and oppositional manoeuvres'. Similarly, media images that celebrate tough, underclass masculinities, such as those found in gangster films or rap music, may serve to valorise the identities of young, marginalised men (Ging, 2006, 2007b) who more readily find themselves demonised in the news media (Devlin, 2000). Without concrete empirical studies of its reception, however, we know very little about how ironic gender stereotyping is actually being understood. In two substantial studies about men's media consumption and film-viewing practices (Ging, 2005, 2007b), there was very little evidence that contemporary images of male machismo and female submissiveness were understood as tongue-in-cheek references to yesterday's gender norms. On the contrary, the research showed that ironic sexism was poorly understood – at best, irony was used as shorthand for 'don't take things too seriously' – since the back story of lad culture's humorously antagonistic interplay with feminism is clearly something that happened too long ago to have any real meaning for fifteen- to twenty-four-year-old male audiences (Gauntlett, 2002).

In Ireland, the broadly celebratory acceptance of the commercialisation of sex may have been intensified by a collective sense of liberation from a censorious and highly repressive brand of Catholicism. However, that both the political and the visual economies of pornography remain highly male dominated is consistently evaded in the rhetoric of liberalism, as are the everyday realities of the abuse and exploitation of women in the sex industry. Certainly, there is an important distinction to be made between pornography and prostitution, yet, as Kon and Riordan (1996) point out in the context of eastern Europe, pornography's overt commodification of women's bodies has contributed significantly to the reassertion of patriarchy and of a burgeoning sex industry. The Irish studies cited above indicate that most young Irish men mobilise liberal rhetoric when discussing pornography, wherein it is generally agreed that women do this kind of work out of choice – 'They're getting paid', 'They chose their career', 'They're not complaining'. However, a majority of the study participants were also deeply uncomfortable with the idea of their girlfriends, mothers or daughters engaging in such activities. This double-speak is perhaps one of the most confounding paradoxes of the new liberalism. Irish women may be finally freed from Catholicism but they must now negotiate the dual forces of bio-determinism and commodification, which have equally high stakes in the regulation of their bodies.

## Hard-wiring masculinity

Nowhere is the language of genetic determinism so prevalent as in contemporary discourses about Irish men and masculinity. In recent years, *Irish Times* journalist John Waters has been to the fore in extolling the virtues of the mythopoetic strand of the men's movement, made famous by Robert Bly's highly influential bestseller *Iron John* (1992). Bly's argument is premised on the notion of innate masculine characteristics: he contends that women have become too involved in the 'civilising' of men and that, if contemporary social ills are to be tackled, men must reclaim their lost power and reject 'feminine' influences such as excessive emotion, sensitivity or indecisiveness. Most of the American men's groups and the literatures they have produced have been founded by and cater to middle-class, and mostly white, American men, whose response to social change has been described by Kimmel and Kaufman (1995: 263) as 'the cry of anguish of privileged American men, men who feel lost in a world in which the ideologies of individualism and manly virtue are out of sync with the realities of urban, industrialized, secular society'. The perception that men are becoming increasingly feminised and disempowered is central to a politics of gender that is underpinned by strict sex-role stereotyping based on biological difference. Men's relationship to the feminine is thus a crucial dividing factor: while most sociologists and psychologists argue that it is men's suppression of the feminine and the imperative to strive towards an illusory masculine ideal that is at the root of male social problems such as juvenile crime, alcohol and drug abuse, suicide and mid-life crisis (Horrocks, 1994, 1995; Clare, 2000), others contend that criminality and social problems arise from modern society's failure to raise young boys according to a strict model of traditional masculinity, which prioritises paternal authority and represses the feminine (Bly, 1992; Farrell, 1993, 1999).

In Ireland, what Harry Ferguson (2002) has referred to as the 'social problematisation of masculinity' has occurred around a number of 'flash-point' issues, including male violence and anti-social behaviour, the alleged feminisation of education, fathers' rights and male suicide. What is striking about the framing of these debates is the way in which they have been underpinned by the gender-essentialist rhetoric of the American men's movement<sup>5</sup> and of self-help literature, which has banded with a reactionary Catholic lobby to produce a highly volatile and distorted public discussion on these issues. As Anne Cleary's (2005) work has shown, suicide has been discussed and debated predominantly along the lines of gender, with male suicide being constructed as a response to men's inability to deal with advances in female power. Factors such as social class, sexuality, alcohol and drug use and urban/rural location, which might have carved up the

picture in a significantly different way, were largely ignored in this debate, although they are beginning to emerge in more recent public discourse. According to Cleary (2005: 156), 'A binary divide between masculinity and femininity drives much research around emotional and psychological issues despite contrary evidence about the across-gender fluidity of emotional lives' (Connell, 2002; Frosh *et al.*, 2002).

This essentialism is also prevalent in recent debates about male violence and anti-social behaviour in Ireland. As Maurice Devlin (2000) has pointed out, working-class male youths are routinely pathologised in the Irish news media, and the young male is constructed 'as a belligerent, wilful creature, naturally avaricious and aggressive, in need of constant punishment if he is to learn the "avoidance of transgression"' (Mariani, 1996: 136). With increasing evidence of anti-social behaviour among young middle-class men, this rhetoric of gender determinism has become even more commonplace, as it helps to evade more probing questions about social marginalisation and its causes, while at the same time justifying the need for increased levels of parental and state authority. During the Brian Murphy trial,<sup>6</sup> for example, psychologist Maureen Gaffney attributed the upsurge in this type of male violence to 'a collapse of the old authority structures', which, she claimed, has allowed young men's 'natural' testosterone-fuelled aggression to go unchecked and untamed. In line with much bio-determinist thinking on gender, analogies with the animal kingdom were implied, so that her account of homosocial male behaviour read much like the voice-over for a nature documentary. She wrote:

In the competition for women, testosterone rises, as though to mobilise the male for the rivalry ahead. (Correspondingly, testosterone falls in men who are approaching marriage and withdrawing from the competitive world of seeking a mate.) (*Irish Times*, 28 February 2004)

However, as Mariani points out:

The fact that antisociality itself is a culturally-constructed concept has been buried under an avalanche of research purporting to locate its cause in 'individual vulnerabilities' that give rise to personality syndromes like attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AHDH), conduct disorder (CD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), and antisocial personality disorder (APD). (Mariani 1996: 136)

In recent years, a proliferation of television documentaries, such as *Why Men Don't Iron* (Channel 4, 1998) and *Testosterone* (Channel 4, 2003), have used 'brain science' to mobilise biological essentialist theories of gender and to establish links between testosterone and male aggression. According to Mariani, this is a complex way of liberating governments of

responsibility for the damage caused by hegemonic masculinity, and of securing the patriarchal status quo. She contends that biological essentialist accounts of criminality ('bio-criminology'), by focusing on congenital disorders in the young, downplay the role of environmental and sociological factors: thus, the behaviours of abused children and poor black children – 'any child ready to point an accusing finger at the system' (Mariani, 1996: 143) – are more readily attributed to congenital neurotransmitter dysfunction or to brain injury incurred in the birth canal (since, it is claimed, *in utero* exposure to testosterone makes the male brain less pliant than the female brain and thus more susceptible to injury in the birth canal) than to abusive or dysfunctional childhoods. While the research acknowledges that socially excluded males are more prone to anti-social behaviour, the prevailing view is that environmental factors are primarily catalysts or triggers that affect only susceptible individuals. Mariani claims that cultural and sociological explanations, which see excessive discipline and the repression of emotion as the problem, have been eclipsed by biological essentialist and individualising frameworks, which function to justify stricter disciplinary measures. Pathologising the problem of white boys out of control, she maintains, is a way of explaining, containing and treating anti-social behaviour, for example by putting them on Ritalin, which has obvious benefits for the pharmaceutical industry, while at the same time maintaining the patriarchal order of things:

Thus, tramps ride the rails, not because a cataclysmic economic depression has thrown them out of work, but to satisfy a perverse pleasure in vagabondage arising from 'defective inhibition'. The 'delinquent' runaway is impelled by a congenital contempt for authority, not the nightmare of savage beatings. (Mariani, 1996: 147)

### **'Raunch culture' for the under-twelves**

The rise of genetic determinism and of 'raunch culture' (Levy, 2005) raises even more important questions about children, who are neither familiar with the ideological back stories of lad culture and post-feminism nor capable of detecting and successfully decoding irony. In Ireland, the children's media, fashion and toy industries have been hugely influenced by American imports over the past twenty years, which has succeeded in creating highly gender-polarised markets through processes of consumption. Gender-neutral clothing and toys have all but disappeared from Irish shops, while the gender coding of advertisements for toys and games has become so extreme that television advertising and product packaging rarely depict male and female children playing together.<sup>7</sup> At the level

of media representation, girls are becoming increasingly sexualised and passive, while boys are depicted as rejecting emotion and engaging in exaggerated performances of aggression and bravado. Against the wider backdrop of a dominant discourse of genetic determinism, this state of affairs is often presented as natural, even inevitable.<sup>8</sup>

There is no conclusive evidence, however, to support the hypothesis that girls and boys have natural or genetic predilections for different types of play, while there is a considerable body of research which shows that social conditioning – through parents, carers, teachers, peers and media images – is the primary cause of differentiated gender behaviours (Condry and Condry, 1976; Hyde, 1981, 1984, 1985, 2005; Giddens, 1982, 2001; West and Zimmerman, 1987; Lightdale and Prentice, 1994; Epstein and Johnson, 1994; Hyde and Plant, 1995; Steele, 1997; Epstein, 1998; Frome and Eccles, 1998; Kimmel, 2000; Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005). Those parents who resign themselves to the genetic ‘inevitability’ of their children’s orientation toward sex-specific toys and games might ask themselves why, if boys are hard-wired to play with guns and girls’ predilection for Barbies is genetically ordained, so much money needs to be spent on such aggressive marketing and forceful colour coding of these products. Moreover, those who actively discourage their male children from playing with female-coded toys surely need not worry: if masculine traits are encoded into the male genes from conception, superficial acts such as playing with dolls or tea sets should not, according to this logic, upset the child’s hard-wired, biologically destined masculinity.

The blatant sexualisation of girlhood in child-directed advertising and marketing imagery raises further questions about consumerism’s impact on children’s self-identity. High-heeled shoes and boots are available in many Irish shoe shops for children aged five and upwards. T-shirts with ‘porn star’ written across the chest are widely available for the same age group. Major chain-stores sell g-string and bra sets for girls ranging from five to ten years of age. Bratz dolls, now far exceeding sales of Barbie, combine pre-pubescent, wide-eyed innocence with the clothing and make-up of the prostitute or dominatrix.<sup>9</sup> Increasingly, seven-year-old girls making their Holy Communion use highlights and fake tanning.

There is a confounding double-speak at work here, whereby viewing paedophile images is a serious crime but using a paedophile aesthetic to sell toys and make-up to children is not. For all its rhetoric about a society of free choice that engenders liberal, open debate, post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland has not yet succeeded in having an honest public discussion about this topic. Paedophilia is portrayed by the Irish media as transgressive, abject or ‘other’, with paedophiles routinely constructed as anti-social ‘outsiders’, (homo)sexually repressed priests or disturbed celebrities. According to

Harry Ferguson (2002), the revelations of clerical abuse by the media, while they have played a crucial role in giving voice to those who have been silenced by an oppressive, autocratic and deeply patriarchal culture, have also served the skew the realities of child abuse in Ireland:<sup>10</sup>

The 'paedophile priest' has become a key symbol of danger to children, a social construction which is entirely a media event implying clear links between celibacy and child sexual abuse. Significantly, while there are many more convicted sex offenders who are married heterosexual men, malestream [*sic*] heterosexual masculinity within and without the Irish family has not been problematised. (Ferguson, 2001: 43)

The point here is not to argue for a causal link between the media's sexualisation of children and the incidence of paedophilia. There is no evidence to support such a link, and it is worth noting that children have been sexually abused throughout history, irrespective of how they were dressed. There is also an important distinction to be made between the production of images that involves the physical or emotional harming of children and that which does not. Nonetheless, research conducted in Canada (Steed, 1994: 138) shows that as adult sex offenders 'got older, they found their predilections reinforced by mainstream culture, movies and rock videos that glorify violent males who dominate younger, weaker sex objects'. What is of more concern here, however, is the potential impact of mediated messages that boys do things and girls look pretty on how people think about children and on how children think about themselves. Given the tendency documented in the psychological literature for most victims of abuse to feel varying levels of guilt or responsibility for what has happened, the media's sexualisation of pre-adolescent girls is unlikely help children in tackling abuse or sexual harassment. Teaching girls to view themselves as passive sexual objects, albeit heavily cloaked in girl power's lippy catch-phrases, is unlikely to equip them with the confidence or sense of self required to deal with the realities of female sexual objectification or to make them feel that society valorises and supports their resistance.

In the absence of concrete ethnographies of reception, however, the impact of such imagery on the attitudes and behaviours of children as they develop remains unclear. Certainly, research shows that children are discerning and media-savvy consumers of popular culture. However, while boys and girls actively use what they consume – clothes, toys, games – to construct their identities, the extreme gender coding of these products arguably limits the repertoires from which they feel they can choose. Peer pressure, combined with the widespread popularity of gender-determinist thinking, would appear to make it difficult, especially for boys, to experiment or cross boundaries. This gender 'straight-jacketing' is arguably at odds with the

notion that, as adults, these men and women will have equal status in their jobs or be able to conduct egalitarian relationships. In this micro-universe of Power Rangers and Bratz, it appears that the seeds are being sown for a highly lucrative future market of adult men and women who understand themselves as polarised, incompatible and unable to communicate. Today's children are set to become tomorrow's self-help generation.

### **When Venus and Mars collide: the self-help solution**

The explosion in self-help literature, CDs and DVDs is both a cause and a symptom of the new essentialism, and the impact of bestselling books such as John Gray's *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* (1993) and Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation* (2001) cannot be underestimated. As Michael Cronin demonstrates in chapter 7 of this volume, the creation of anxieties around modern living makes individuals increasingly dependent on private or corporate solutions. Rather than questioning the structural causes of gender inequality and instigating social change, transformation takes place through the individual consumption of (self-help) therapy. While most self-help therapies that address problems of gender relations give the impression of taking radical individual action to change things, they ultimately serve to preserve the status quo. Instead of tackling the root causes of inequality, they teach individuals how to gloss over and live with the symptoms. Explanations of men and women as coming from different planets fit with common-sense assumptions, and do not challenge the existing economic and social structures into which people have become enmeshed. From the New Age-inflected literature, which draws upon theories of yin and yang, to the Christian end of the self-help market, with its call for a return to wifely subservience, this literature consistently ignores the social in favour of the biological.<sup>11</sup> Most importantly, because the supposed incompatibilities between the sexes are presented as ordained, the demand for dating agencies, self-help books and sex and relationship counselling is potentially infinite. Love, sex and procreation have become highly complex emotional danger zones, which the common human apparently cannot negotiate without the help of 'expertise'.

The new essentialism has taken root in the Irish media to such an extent that reviews of self-help literature have ceased even to acknowledge that the 'nature thesis' might be contentious. In a recent *Irish Times* review of a book entitled *Babyproofing Your Marriage*, co-authored by Irishwoman Cathy O'Neill and two other mothers who found their relationships coming under strain after the birth of their children, Kate Holmquist

(2007) fails to question any of the deeply problematic theories and methodologies upon which the book is based. Like the raft of other self-help books which ostensibly critique yet in reality rehearse and perpetuate myths about motherhood,<sup>12</sup> these approaches ensure that childcare and home-making remain the emotional responsibility of women. Manuals about balancing family life and work aimed at men do not exist, nor does anybody seem to think they should. The eternal post-feminist conundrum – of how to juggle children and career – is thus constructed as a problem exclusively for women. Paradoxically, it is a common feature of much post-feminist discourse to blame feminism for landing women with this ‘second shift’, while refusing to acknowledge that the real source of the problem lies with both men’s and women’s unwillingness or inability to divide housework and childcare equally.<sup>13</sup> As Anthony McMahon (1999) has so cogently illustrated, the dominance of a progressive or optimistic rhetoric of gender equality has effectively blocked progress on these issues. Though it is difficult to measure, the influence of self-help therapies has undoubtedly been instrumental in compounding and sustaining the centrality of post-feminist and bio-determinist discourses in Ireland.

Finally, the gender-difference hypothesis provides industry and the professions with a useful strategy for channelling women in and out of the workforce as economic needs arise. Increasingly, it is also used within industry to encourage women into particular types of activity as well to allow companies to score corporate and social responsibility points for their ostensibly pro-female policies. An article on the Microsoft website uses ‘brain science’ to claim that women make better managers:

In the past few decades, researchers have discovered physiological variations in the brains of men and women. For example, male brains are about 10% larger than female brains. But women have more nerve cells in certain areas. Women also tend to have a larger corpus collusum [*sic*] – the group of nerve fibers that connects left and right hemispheres. That makes women faster at transferring data between the computational, verbal left half and the intuitive, visual right half. Result: Women are more flexible and find it easier to multitask. Men are usually left-brain oriented. That often makes them better at solving abstract equations and problems.<sup>14</sup>

As Aileen O’Carroll (2006) points out, an almost identical discourse was also used by the president of Harvard in 2005 to explain why women were under-represented in science. Under his presidency, the number of tenured jobs offered to women at Harvard dropped from 36 per cent to 13 per cent. O’Carroll makes a crucial point:

The idea of gender differences can be used to either exclude women (as in the position of women in Harvard) or to attract more women (as in the call

centre workers). The malleability of the idea of difference, and the different political uses to which it is put, should make us very wary of arguments that take difference as their starting point.

## Conclusion

The Celtic Tiger years have led us into new discursive arenas, in which ideological consensus is increasingly achieved at the level of the symbolic, the rhetorical and the discursive. Although it is difficult to determine or measure the extent to which consumerism and its associated imageries are affecting how people actually 'do gender' in their daily lives (West and Zimmerman, 1987), there is widespread evidence to suggest that attitudes to gender are being (re)constructed through subtle processes of consumption and economic rationalisation, which are channelled through an increasingly profit-driven media. As Phelan, drawing on Billig's (1995) work, points out in chapter 5, ideological production is sometimes most usefully conceptualised in terms of 'banal' representational practices, rather than through indices of explicit, or intentional, neoliberal bias. The rising popularity of bio-determinism across a wide range of interconnected industries – from self-help therapy to computer games – means that these ideas infiltrate our lives and relationships in subtle but presumably significant ways.

Rather than adopting a fatalistic liberal response to these developments, however, Irish people have the possibility to intervene or to call for intervention. At the level of education, the Educate Together model is an excellent example of collective self-determination, whereby parents and educators have formed democratically run cooperative schools based on the principles of gender equality and cultural inclusion. At secondary level, there is an ongoing and urgent need for further gender mainstreaming initiatives such as those already implemented by the Gender Equality Unit of the Department of Education. However, if these are to succeed, both parents and teachers must confront their own prejudices in relation to gender and actively tackle the subtle instances of sexism and homophobia which too often go unchecked. As Sadker and Sadker's (1994) three-year study in the United States so aptly demonstrates, teachers who consider themselves to be gender egalitarian are often not conscious of the vastly different ways in which they treat boys and girls. In recent years, the non-secular nature of Irish education has been highlighted by the Congress of Catholic Secondary Schools Parents' rejection of the Exploring Masculinities programme, on the grounds that it encourages positive attitudes to homosexuality and gay marriage (Oliver, 2001). In this context, popular discourses of progress and inclusion are especially paradoxical.

Furthermore, there is a need for increased lobbying on the part of parents to have child-directed advertising on Irish television banned. The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland's children's advertising code prohibits celebrities from advertising food or drink for children and stipulates that advertisements for fast food must carry a health warning (Shaw, 2004). However, this is far cry from the Swedish model, which has banned all advertising to children under twelve years of age, and from countries such as Norway, Austria, Belgium and Denmark, which impose tight restrictions on advertising around children's programmes. However, given that roughly 50 per cent of Irish children watch non-Irish channels (Shaw, 2004) and the internet presents another vast source of advertising, it is clearly not possible to protect children from what has become a widely promotional culture (Wernick, 1991). Increasingly, efforts and resources need to be devoted to the teaching of critical media literacy in schools. While a media component has been introduced into the primary curriculum and into the English syllabus for the Junior and Leaving Certificates (O'Neill, 2000), this is far from adequate, given the extent to which young people engage with mediated messages and images on a daily basis. To date, a more vocational and market-oriented emphasis on digital literacy has tended to overshadow a more critically oriented model, and there is clearly a growing need to involve students in the broader philosophical, ideological and political debates around modern mass media. As media reception research with male teenagers in Ireland has shown (Ging, 2005), evidence of media literacy is by no means synonymous with an ability to decode media ideologically. Thus, the introduction of media studies curricula which foster a culture of critical reflection and questioning is one very tangible way in which education policy might respond to the growing gender apartheid facing children.

Related to this is the need for an open discussion about the sexualisation of children through consumerism and the way in which the mainstreaming of a pornographic aesthetic is (re)constructing – at least discursively – male and female sexuality and desire. Research (Ging, 2005) indicates that many young men are blind to the gaze economy of popular culture, which dictates that it is still mostly men who look and women who are looked at, and so it is important to render consistently visible the inconsistencies and paradoxes of the post-feminist rhetoric of the level playing field or 'ground zero' (Kimmel, 2008). Finally, it is crucial that men become involved in the debate about childcare, and that male accounts of the pressures of balancing career and childcare are acknowledged and listened to. It is also up to women to facilitate the sharing of this responsibility, by rejecting the unbalanced and limiting parameters within which the debate has been framed by self-help literature, women's magazines and post-feminist discourse generally.

The increasingly commercial media-scape in Ireland has enabled deeply conservative images and ideologies of gender to proliferate. Meanwhile, the increased visibility of homosexuality, the perceived freedoms of 'raunch culture' and the broad acceptance of the myth that equality has been achieved have serviced a convincing rhetoric of progress and, in doing so, have ultimately served to gloss over the persistence of substantial material inequalities between men and women. In addition to this, neoliberalism's mutually beneficial rapport with bio-determinism has arguably diminished the responsibility of the government vis-à-vis a range of social problems, including crime, anti-social behaviour, social exclusion and paedophilia, since it locates these problems in the genes, hormones or brainwaves of individual bodies.

While the successes of feminism have been undoubtedly monumental, they have also been dramatically overplayed by the popular media, with the result that the feminist movement is either held in contempt or is considered to have been so successful as to have rendered itself obsolete, or both. Indeed, the expediency with which a complacent and often regressive discourse on gender has assumed centre stage in the last decade in Ireland is extraordinary. That said, blunt 'hypodermic needle' models, which assume that people passively absorb media messages, do not account for the complexity of our engagements with mass culture. Considerable research remains to be done on how genetic-determinist and post-feminist discourses are influencing the ways in which we think about and 'do gender' in Ireland. Until we begin to explore in detail the actual meanings and uses generated by post-feminist images and discourses, as well as by Mars-Venus accounts of gender relations, it remains unclear whether and to what extent Irish people will accept, resist or negotiate the messages of a highly Americanised consumer culture, in which men and women are being increasingly constructed as polarised rather than united.

## Notes

- 1 It is important to stress from the outset that this chapter is not an attempt to convince the reader that gender is socially and culturally constructed. A vast body of distinguished sociological and psychological researchers (among them John Condry and Sandra Condry, Anthony Giddens, Michael Kimmel, Michael Kaufmann, Harry Brod, Janet Shelby-Hyde, Lynne Segal, Máirtín Mac an Ghail, Chris Haywood, Raewyn Connell, Margaret Matlin, Deborah Cameron and Judith Butler) have long identified and discredited the flawed premises and methodologies upon which biological essentialist theories of gender difference are founded.
- 2 In 2006, only 14 per cent of TDs in Dáil Eireann were women, which is well below the average European Union rate of 23 per cent, and in 2004 women's earnings were 65.7 per cent of men's (Central Statistics Office, 2006: 10).

- 3 The Brantano shoe company ran an advertising campaign in 2007 which featured a fictional institute founded by Professor Anne-Marie Brantano, who first discovered the 'slingback synapse'. This is a prime example of a discourse which straddles both ironic sexism and genetic determinism, thus simultaneously parodying and normalising woman's 'natural' disposition toward shoe shopping.
- 4 The website of Channel 6 ([www.channel6.ie](http://www.channel6.ie); the channel was rebranded 3e in January 2009, <http://3e.tv3.ie>) proclaimed that 'Channel 6 will aggressively advertise throughout launch year with a very substantial multi-platformed campaign designed to raise awareness of the station and direct viewers to particular shows and themed nights. This campaign will be advertised at weights previously unheard of in Ireland for a TV station.' ([http:// about.whtml](http://about.whtml))
- 5 The men's movement is by no means a unified political grouping; it also has radically different connotations in different parts of the world. In spite of this, the expression been used predominantly in the media as an umbrella term to describe those men's groups whose agendas include – at a political level – the recuperation of male power and privilege (usurped by feminism) and/or – at a personal level – the rediscovery of the 'masculine self'.
- 6 Brian Murphy, aged eighteen, was kicked and beaten to death outside a nightclub in south County Dublin in August 2000. His assailants were young middle-class men and the attack was apparently without motive.
- 7 Irish advertising to children is virtually unregulated. The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland has succeeded in banning only advertising for junk food products that are endorsed by celebrities or cartoon characters.
- 8 See, for example, Kate Holmquist's article in the *Irish Times*, 3 November 2007, in which she argues that the sexism in toy advertising is justified because boys and girls are hard-wired to be different. Boys, she argues illogically, should not be encouraged to play with tea sets and ironing boards because they will have to do enough ironing and cooking when, as adults, they discover that women will no longer iron their shirts or serve them dinner. Why, in that case, girls should be given these toys is unclear. Holmquist concludes her article, with a 180-degree turn, by claiming that children have never been more aware of the fluid nature of gender identification, evidenced by the increasingly inventive ways in which they play with flexible notions of gender!
- 9 Bratz Babies come accessorised with nappies, bottles and rattles as well as earrings, make-up and handbags.
- 10 Statistics from the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre show that, in 2005, 19.6 per cent of reported child sexual abuse cases were perpetrated by fathers, 16.2 per cent by brothers, 26.8 per cent by another male relative and 30.2 per cent by another known person. Only 3.4 per cent of cases were perpetrated by strangers (Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, 2005).
- 11 Examples are Laura Doyle, *The Surrendered Wife: A Practical Guide to Finding Intimacy, Passion, and Peace With a Man* (2001), and Leanne Payne, *Crisis in Masculinity* (1995).
- 12 See also Susan Maushart, *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Our Lives and Why We Never Talk About It* (1999), and Joan Williams *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It* (2000).
- 13 A report launched by the Equality Authority in June 2008 shows that significant inequalities persist in Ireland – to the disadvantage of women – in terms of the amount of paid and unpaid work done by men and women (Equality Authority, 2008).
- 14 Microsoft Small Business Centre, at [www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/management/leadership\\_training/do\\_women\\_make\\_better\\_managers.mspx](http://www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/management/leadership_training/do_women_make_better_managers.mspx) (accessed 15 February 2007).