

Does "Scandal" Challenge the Dominance of the 'male-stream' in World Politics?

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SOPHIE PUET, OCT 2 2015

In recent years, popular culture has undoubtedly become an increasingly important and visible site for examining world politics as the two have come to be inextricably intertwined. After all, 'it is through the medium of television that information and ideas are disseminated' (Weber, 2001: 80). As a central component of popular culture, films and TV programmes are arguably shaped by political debate. Traditionally films such as *All The Presidents Men* have portrayed men as the protagonist with the ultimate authority, thus serving to reproduce the patriarchal system. However, recently there has been a rise in popularity of 'power women' TV shows (Hod 2014) with the likes of *Scandal* and *State of Affairs* which are arguably challenging the 'male-stream' in both popular culture and world politics (see appendix 1). Using discourse analysis, this paper will explore how the TV shows 'use language to construct specific views of the social world' (Rose, 2009: 140) through a feminist lens in order to conclude whether or not *Scandal* challenges the dominance of the 'male-stream' in world politics. Where appropriate, comparisons will be drawn with *State of Affairs* in order to establish trends in TV shows today. Essentially, the premise of this paper will argue that whilst on the surface *Scandal* appears to make bold feminist statements, in depth discourse analysis reveals that this is not the case, nor from a feminist perspective is it enough to empower women today. As a result, some of these programmes have yet to be incorporated into mainstream popular culture, most notably *State of Affairs* which has now been cancelled.

Feminisms, as referred to by Storey (2009: 135) provide useful frameworks that can be applied to the study of gender inequality when examining the relationship between popular culture and world politics. Feminist scholars have consistently argued that narratives about the ways that world politics are both implicitly and explicitly gendered: they exclude women and values understood to be stereotypically 'feminine' (Sjoberg 2010: 55). This paper acknowledges that there are at least four types of feminisms as determined by Walby (1990), however radical feminism will be applied in order to determine whether or not *Scandal* challenges the 'male-stream' in an attempt to break from the systematic dominance (Randall, 1987: 12) that serves to reinforce the patriarchal discourse of world politics.

In regards to political science literature, the term 'male-stream' was coined by radical feminist Mary O'Brien (1981) and can be defined as 'the dominant conventions, notions and ideas throughout Western history have rationalized and legitimized male dominance' (Hansen 1993: 81). In other words, literature in political science is predominantly 'male-stream' as it has tended to concentrate on men, is mostly carried out by men and then assumes that the findings can be applied to women. O'Brien (1981: 5) argues that in order to break this discourse women need to 'be able to demonstrate that male dominant culture and the male-stream thought which buttresses and justifies it are both, in some sense, prejudice by the very fact that they are masculine'. In this respect the term 'male-stream' will be used with regards to the TV shows that have traditionally been dominated by men, thus reproducing gender inequality through forms of popular culture.

Much feminist scholarship has asserted that certain depictions of gender roles found in TV programmes reinforce chauvinistic attitudes and solidify stereotypes about women and their place in society (Press & Cole 1999; Tuchman et al. 1978). First articulated by Tuchman (1978) 'this perspective assumes that televised entertainment programming has a strong influence on attitudes towards women by reflecting dominant societal norms and underrepresenting women in positions of authority' (Holbert et al. 2003: 47). This is true for TV shows such as The

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West Wing which does not feature women in positions of power. However, *Scandal* appears hospitable to feminist agendas by making bold gender equality statements on many levels. This is supported by film critics who claim that '*Scandal* is one of the few programmes that strives to unveil the ways in which women are undermined in our day-to-day lives' (Putnam 2014). For instance, the show passes the Bechdel test (1985) by meeting the criteria which specifies that 1) there must be at least two (named) women characters 2) who talk to each other 3) about something other than a man. Thus from this perspective it could be argued that *Scandal* does indeed challenge the 'male-stream' in popular culture by proportionally representing women in positions of authority, an aspect that is lacking from world politics today.

In light of Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential bid, the issue of women in the White House is at the forefront of political debate in the United States. Despite this, according to Vaughn and Goren (2012: 124) traditionally TV shows rarely cast women as US presidents which gives us reason to explore whether women are able to maintain this position when assumed into the role. In *State of Affairs*, for instance, the president is portrayed by Constance Payton, an African-American woman which implies that women should hold positions of authority in the White House. Although in *Scandal* the president is not a woman, the plot revolves around female protagonist Olivia Pope, a former White House communications director who now successfully runs her own crisis management firm. Great emphasis is placed on her success as a 'fixer' and her ability to solve all problems as she is constantly referred to as 'the only person for the job'. As a result, Pope uses her position to assert that powerful women should and ought to belong in the White House. In this way, both *Scandal* and *State of Affairs* challenge the 'male-stream' in both popular culture and world politics by placing women in powerful political roles and demonstrating that women should no longer be 'consigned to the margins of his-tory' (Hansen 1993: 81).

Similarly, the presence of women in the military has been extremely gendered throughout history and women have arguably not been part of the mainstream in military organisations, despite fighting wars and taking the same risks that men do, women miss 'both the reward and elusive status of equality' (Sjoberg, 2010: 67-68). In this respect, parallels can be drawn with the notion that 'popular cinema portrays leadership characteristics as uniquely masculine in nature. For instance, politicians are often portrayed as warriors or action heroes' (Vaughn and Goren, 2012: 123) which leads us to deduce that leadership attributes are considered inherently masculine. This is exemplified in *Scandal* during a monologue between journalist James Novak and Congresswoman Josie Marcus who is running for president. When the Novak poses the question: "...you lack the experience to be president of the United States. What's your response to that?" Marcus replies, "it's not about experience, James, it's about gender." She argues that he is "advancing the idea that women are weaker than men" and having served seven years in the United States army she asks him why he does not refer to her as 'solider' or 'lieutenant' as he would if he was addressing her male counterparts. In this way *Scandal* appears to challenge misogynistic views which continue to be further perpetuated by the media.

However, while the discourse of *Scandal* appears to be advocating for women's equality on the surface, further examination indicates that the show is not only guilty of gender stereotyping, but also of reinforcing the patriarchal discourse of world politics. The 'masculinisation' of women when assumed into positions of authority has become a visible trend in popular culture. For instance, in *Scandal* Pope is referred to as a 'gladiator' which is traditionally defined as 'a man trained to fight with weapons against other men or wild animals in an arena' (Oxford Dictionary). This term denotes that in order to be respected when in charge, women must take up the position of men in order to be successful. This is also evident in world politics, for instance Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher underwent voice coaching to lower the pitch of her voice to make her sound more 'statesmanlike' (Norton and Brenders 1996: 82). This implies that because she is a woman, she does not possess the characteristics of being an assertive leader, and therefore demonstrates how she underwent a process of 'masculinisation' in order to be assumed into the role as PM. On this basis it can be argued that although by placing women in these roles of power it leads to women being proportionately represented, it does not suffice as gender equality if women are currently being undermined by the fact they are not male.

Furthermore, Randall (1987: 12) argues that 'radical feminism has attacked the notion of a distinctive political arena, and the public private split that goes with it'. Although it meets the criteria to pass the Bechdel test, *Scandal* dramatises the moral ambiguity and complex, layered relationships between the private and public spheres. The

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show depicts First Lady Mellie Grant and her battle to get noticed as more than just the 'presidents wife'. This is exemplified when she explains; "I did all of it. And what will I be remembered for? I will be remembered as the wife of a man who did something with his life." In support of this Enloe (1989) argues that women within the political discourse have been assigned categories of supporting roles within it, for instance 'the wives of diplomats'. Similarly, in an interview with Novak, Congresswoman Marcus reprimands him for choosing to conduct the interview in her house; "it reminds people that I'm a woman without saying it." This suggests that in day-to-day practices the subordination of women has become systematic in the reproduction of the current patriarchal discourse of world politics.

Although it could be argued that *Scandal* is not entirely successful in its bid to challenge the 'male-stream' of world politics, one could argue the feminist undertones of *Scandal* acknowledge the hardship that women face in breaking the 'glass ceiling'. This is important in creating awareness of the ongoing gender inequality in politics, and thus can be seen as an attempt to encourage women to 'sit at the table' (Sandberg, 2014: 27). Arguably this is achieved in *Scandal* through a subtle form of 'lipstick feminism' which seeks to embrace traditional concepts of femininity. For instance, Pope's fashion sense has received notable media attention and actress Kerry Washington (who plays Pope) has now launched a '*Scandal* clothing line inspired by her character's powerful style' (Daily Mail 2014). The topic of fashion of women in politics is not a new one, with First Lady Michelle Obama being a somewhat fashion icon in the political sphere. On one hand there can be subtle symbolism expressed by fashion, for instance the first female Secretary of State Madeline Albright used to make political statements using brooches. She once wore a pin which depicted 'the glass ceiling in its ideal condition: shattered' (Albright, 2009: 74). However, such a focus on appearance can distract attention away from the politics aspect and arguably leaves female politicians more vulnerable to being judged on their appearance, opposed to their political ideology. As a result, Ellen (2012) argues that 'when a woman such as Clinton dismisses her image as unimportant, she is more or less classified as unfit for office.'

In conclusion, it is fair to contend that both *Scandal* and *State of Affairs* mark a progressive, multifaceted and highly politicised understanding of gender relations in world politics. Both of these programmes are arguably part of a rise in 'power women' shows that aim to challenge the 'male-stream' in popular culture. As a contribution to that enterprise, this essay has set out to explore the representation of women in powerful roles situated within the White House. Through a feminist discourse analysis, this paper has examined to what extent the show challenges the dominance of the 'male-stream'. By drawing parallels with *State of Affairs* it has demonstrated that despite assuming women as protagonists in TV shows, their male counterparts are continually undermining them. In this respect, characters such as Pope and Payton are not as successful in the position of power as their male counterparts perhaps would be. On one hand it should be acknowledged that by placing women in such positions it is revolutionary insofar as it has rarely been done in television, particularly in the case of a female president. However, it could prove counterproductive as the audience is continually reminded that the current patriarchal system prevails. Ultimately, from a radical feminist perspective, it is not enough to assume women into these roles in the current system, because as Millett (1970: 23) argues, politics is a series of 'power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another.'

Appendices

Appendix 1

List of TV shows that feature a woman president:

- 24
- Battlestar Galactica
- Commander in Chief
- Hail to the Chief
- L'Etat de Grace
- Prison Break
- Scandal (Acting president)

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- State of Affairs
- The West Wing
- Veep
- XII: The Conspiracy

List of films that feature a woman president:

- Mafia!
- Project Moonbase
- Kisses for My President
- The Woman Every Man Wants
- Iron Sky
- Les Patterson Saves the World
- Whoops Apocalypse

As part of the discourse analysis employed in this paper, it was important to establish approximately how many films and TV shows feature a woman as president. From this research it is possible to deduce that there have been more female presidents in TV than in films, however both lists are extremely short. It is interesting to note that the TV series are predominantly political thrillers whereas the films are mostly comedies.

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