Culture is a struggle for meanings as society is a struggle for power.
John Fiske (1987a)

The struggle for meaning is here, and it is a struggle of and for political criticism . . .
Stephen Heath (1990)

This chapter attempts to think through some issues pertaining to the critical cultural analysis of the representation of men and masculinity on American prime-time television. There are many pitfalls that arise in such an endeavor, and there is a need to be reflexive about the location from which one (in my case, as a white, male, heterosexual academic) speaks and writes about masculinity, or as Tulloch (1990, p. 6) has put it, the “desires, practices, assumptions and discourses which make up one’s agency as an author,” lest we reproduce the hegemonic (masculinist) culture we seek to interrogate, challenge, and transform. Nevertheless,

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such work is necessary and vital if we are to advance our understanding of the gender regime of television and questions of male power.\(^1\)

The main difficulty that male scholars face is similar to the one Richard Dyer has elucidated in his work on the representation of whiteness as an ethnic category in mainstream film: “White power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular,” “whiteness” is constructed as the norm against which non-dominant groups are defined as “other” (Dyer, 1988). “Masculinity,” like “whiteness,” does not appear to be cultural/historical category at all, thus rendering invisible the privileged position from which (white) men in general are able to articulate their interests to the exclusion of the interests of women, men and women of color, and children.

Since Williams (1977) and Gitlin (1987) first explored the operations of cultural hegemony, there has been a substantial body of feminist and nonfeminist scholarship on television and gender from a variety of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches (for an overview, see Buck & Newton, 1989). While Gitlin (1987) stressed that hegemony “is reasserted in different ways at different times, even by different logics,” his main goal was to examine these processes in relation to liberal capitalism and consumer, bourgeois ideology. However, if we are to advance the theory of cultural hegemony, it is clear that we need to give separate attention to questions of the relations between television and gender, to analyze the expression of patriarchal ideology and gender/sexual politics on its own terms. Any theory of cultural hegemony must also take account of the critical studies perspective on the audience, specifically, the thesis that subordinate members of the audience are able to resist the hegemonic thrust of media culture. It is not my intention to offer a synthesis of the theory of hegemony and the theory of resistance, but rather to suggest some revisions in the theory of hegemony in order to conceptualize a “moving state of play in meanings, which is then articulated to a state of play in the field of power” (Hall, 1989, p. 51). This revision entails drawing upon the critical study of men and masculinities (see Hearn & Melechi, this volume; Hearn & Morgan, 1990). More specifically, I would like to consider whether the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” can be usefully employed to analyze the dialectics of domination and resistance that characterize television culture and its discursive construction of masculinity.

Media studies has not considered masculinity as a problematic or historically troubled category until recently (Penley & Willis, 1988). Grossberg and Treichler (1987) suggest that studies of media and gender have largely been oriented toward “the ‘depiction’ (picturing) of females on television in relation to presumed cultural realities and norms.” For the most part, as Fejes’s (1989) review indicates, most empirical research on men and the media utilized and was limited to the sex-role framework of functionalist sociology, addressing the nature and effects of stereotyped male and female role portrayals. Feminist theory and scholarship has, for obvious reasons, concentrated on women’s devaluation in communication processes, the social construction of femininity, and women’s efforts and abilities to resist or challenge patriarchal ideology, in order to account for women’s subordination or oppression and women’s cultural experience (cf. Brown, 1990; Rakow, 1990; Steeves, 1987). While much more work on these issues remains to be done, there is also a need for media scholars to examine and analyze how media institutions, through their specific representational forms and practices, are involved in the production and re-production of masculinity as a cultural category. How, in short, is masculinity itself defined and redefined in order to secure a position of dominance for men within the sex/gender system? Is there a single, unified masculine discourse, which constructs masculinity in opposition to a (usually subordinated) femininity, or, as Hall (1989, p. 51) suggests, are discursive systems always the product of articulations, always contradictory, containing possibilities for transcoding and decoding the dominant definitions? In this chapter, following Connell’s (1987) work, I explore hegemonic, conservative, and subordinated masculinities in three areas: gender and genre, the “new view of manhood,” and heterosexual ideology. Television’s representation of “femininized” masculinity as well as homosexuality will be taken as “indicative features of what the hegemonic process has in practice had to work to control” (Williams, 1977, p. 113).

Gender and Genre

According to Gitlin (1987), genres are one of the concrete forms through which cultural hegemony operates. Perhaps the most sophisticated treatment of the “engendering work” of television has been Fiske’s (1987a, 1987b) examination of gendered genres. From an ethnographically informed, structuralist-accented, cultural studies perspective, Fiske offers a comparative, dialectical analysis of the basic narrative form of soap opera and cop adventure programs that includes evidence from ethnographic studies of viewing practices. Fiske argues
that television helps to produce a "crucial categorization of its viewers into masculine and feminine subjects" (1987a, p. 179) through particular generic conventions and the negotiated or oppositional readings they invite. In his view, soap opera lends itself to resistant readings by women, who occupy a subordinate position within patriarchy, while the conventions of cop adventure shows, which are designed to address men, primarily reinforce dominant gender ideology through the articulation of gender differences (such as sensitive/tough, domestic/professional, and so on). For example, Fiske argues that masculinity in programs like Magnum, P.I., is primarily defined along two dimensions: self-sufficiency and assertiveness, yet different subordinated groups (boys, black men, and women) will negotiate masculine ideology toward their interests. For Fiske, the "polysemy" of media texts and the heterogeneity of audiences thus explains why hegemonic ideology is always under "threat," why television, as popular culture, makes possible a kind of semiotic democracy.

Fiske does avoid the categoricalism of a purely structuralist analysis of gender, since he shows how masculine ideology overlaps with ideologies of race and nation. Yet, further analysis within the category masculinity seems necessary since masculinity is inflected not only by race and nationality, but also by class, ethnicity, generation, and sexual preference (Mouffe, 1983). Not only are women excised out of masculine narratives, but gay men (and lesbian women) are as well; heterosexual masculinity is also defined, in part, by its distance from homosexuality (Kimmel, 1987b).

Fiske also acknowledges that other programs combine masculine and feminine forms, and that genres evolve historically, suggesting perhaps that the meanings of masculinity and femininity cannot be easily reduced to a system of binary oppositions. Other scholars have noted the ways in which particular texts, performers, or forms have blurred the boundaries of masculinity and femininity (cf. Auferheide, 1986; Modleski, 1990; Wernick, 1987). Fiske suggests that even within masculine narratives, there is evidence of the destabilization of "masculinity" as a category, which may allow male viewers to experience the "feminine" pleasures that contradict, if not deconstruct, the dominant ideology. He claims, for instance, that the image of men in shows like Miami Vice, while conforming to the masculine ideology of action-oriented genres, has redefined masculinity as appearance, concluding that "Miami Vice's challenge to the meaning of masculinity may be the most insidious and politically effective because it occurs not at the level of what is represented but how it is represented" (p. 222). However, from the point of view of cultural hegemony, Miami Vice's re-coding of masculinity and the "pleasures of style, look, and appearance" it offers may be less of a challenge to patriarchal values, less of an opportunity for men to interrogate those values, than a construction of a masculine consumer subject. As Ebert (1988) has argued from a postmodern feminist cultural perspective:

The differentiations between masculine and feminine increasingly collapse under the pressure of capitalism, yet patriarchy finds new ways to perpetuate male privilege, make sure that wages, property ownership, control over production and political power remain largely gender differentiated. (p. 21)

In Fiske's analysis, exactly how Miami Vice's contradictory image of men articulates with any specific social formation and the larger context of postindustrial, transnational consumer capitalism is not examined.

From Fiske's perspective (and possibly that of U.S. cultural studies as a whole), hegemonic ideology appears to have great difficulty inserting itself into our everyday, cultural experiences in a way that would define most people's commonsense understandings of the gender regime. Fiske, for example, concludes that "despite the power of ideology to reproduce itself in its subjects, despite the hegemonic force of the dominant classes, the people still manage to make their own meanings and to construct their own culture within, and often against, that which the industry provides them" (1987b, p. 286). This conclusion seems to contradict his earlier claim that oppositional viewers would be unlikely to watch popular TV programs (p. 266). Budd, Entman, and Steinman (1990) have also recently pointed out other difficulties with the thesis that audiences routinely resist the hegemonic thrust of media content as often as cultural studies proposes. Moreover, in this formulation "men" appear to be characterized as members of the "dominant classes" who hold power over women, although not all "masculinities" have the same relation to discourses and institutions of power (Penley & Willis, 1988). These considerations, as well as other criticisms of "ludic postmodern" theory (see Zavarzadeh, 1991) or "resistance" theory (see Sholle, 1990), lead us to ask whether the cultural studies' conceptualization of the hegemonic process in television is adequate to the task of a critical cultural analysis of television and gender.
Hegemonic Masculinity

The concept of “hegemonic masculinity” originates within recent work in the sociology of gender. Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1987) and Connell (1987) argue that hegemonic masculinity should not be understood as the “male role” but as a particular variety of masculinity to which women and others (young, effeminate, or homosexual men) are subordinated. For Carrigan et al. (1987), hegemonic masculinity is a question of “how particular men inhabit positions of power and wealth and how they legitimate and reproduce social relationships that generate dominance” (p. 179). Hegemonic masculinity thus refers to the social ascendency of a particular version or model of masculinity that operates on the terrain of common sense and conventional morality that defines “what it means to be a man,” thus securing the dominance of some men (and the subordination of women) within the sex/gender system. The ascendency of men as a ruling bloc within capitalist patriarchy is achieved not only through violence and coercion but also through a cultural process in which masculinism, the dominant ideology of patriarchy, meets with resistance and challenge. For this reason, the analysis of hegemonic masculinity is also a question of how oppositional gender ideologies (such as liberal feminism or gay/lesbian politics) becomes absorbed, contained, and rearticulated. Moreover, as Connell (1987) argues, the “justifying ideology for the patriarchal core complex and the overall subordination of women requires the creation of a gender-based hierarchy among men” (p. 110). This hierarchy has three elements: hegemonic masculinity, conservative masculinity, and subordinated masculinities. While this hierarchy is supported and maintained by a variety of institutions of patriarchy, it is the institutionalized cultural expression of this hierarchy in the mass media, and prime-time television in particular, that concerns me here.

Some scholars have begun to focus on the patterns of hegemonic masculinity in prime-time television. For example, the male-oriented action-adventure genre has evolved to the point where women figure more directly into the plot (as the hero’s buddy or love interest); however, these “tales are still very much male-dominated and male-defined: In fact, most feature an aggressive masculinity, expressed through guns, tanks, armed helicopters, and other instruments of death. Emphasis is placed on the male body, its musculature and strength, and its ability to withstand torture and to kill efficiently” (Marchetti, 1989, p. 191). This analysis supports Connell’s claim that patriarchal power “requires the construction of a hypermasculine ideal of toughness and dominance” (1987, p. 80). Moreover, in the 1980s, these definitions of masculinity were aligned with the politics of the New Right. Schwichtenberg (1987), for example, suggests how The A-Team’s encoding of masculinity and femininity enabled the Right to align “what it means to be man” with a notion of “the will of the people” and the “national interest.” These representations of masculinity secure ruling-class hegemony by neutralizing class antagonisms and harnessing working-class resistance to authoritarian ends. This form of gender stereotyping, as a number of analysts have pointed out, was a cultural expression of the attempt to restore the loss of masculine authority in the post-Vietnam era.

The action-adventure genre clearly represents a popular genre that continued to define men in relation to power, authority, aggression, and technology. Other television genres express the values of hegemonic masculinity as well. Sports programming represents men in relation to competition, strength, and discipline, while news programming features men in relation to achievement, leadership, and control. Even the television Western, which defines masculinity in terms of the cowboy images and the myth of the West, has been revived in prime time (e.g., Young Riders, Guns of Paradise).

The relationship between such genres, the hegemonic principles they articulate, and audiences is, of course, complex. According to Cantor (1990), images of gender vary according to genre and the intended audience; the dominating, authoritative male is uncommon in domestic comedy. Her analysis suggests a pattern of continuity and change in the portrayal of men as fathers and husbands, one that perpetuates the myth of female dominance and the loss of male authority as well as the myth of fatherhood. In Cantor’s view, domestic comedy is a vehicle for cultural myths, portraying men in roles in the TV world they do not occupy in the real world. However, against this functionalist thesis, some cultural analysts have argued that “myths” of female dominance, as part of feminine discourse, may appeal to women and men who reject paternal stereotypes (e.g., Coach) and some aspects of traditional sex roles (e.g., Who’s the Boss?). A more complex view of the relationship between hegemonic principles and popular fictions, such as situation comedy, is suggested by Woollacott (1986). According to her, only historical analysis can specify whether situation comedies work to stabilize existing subjectivities, or whether they “come to provide a nexus through which ideologies may be actively reorganized, shifting the subjectivities at
their core” (p. 217). Indeed, the ’80s “sensitive man” seems to provide an opportunity to explore this question further.

Conservative Masculinity

Some popular critics have focused on changing images of men and have hailed the advent of images of “liberated” masculinity on television. Lehrer’s (1989) selective examination of male characters in thirtysomething, L.A. Law, and the short-lived series Men, leads him to wonder whether “themes of male liberation” have become a staple of television drama (Lehrer, 1989). According to him, thirtysomething, broke “new ground in portraying the conflicts and feelings of its male characters,” presenting a “new view of manhood” in which “sensitive, nurturing men, aware of themselves and their feelings, take the spotlight” (Lehrer, 1989). While this reading implies a reconstruction of masculinity that is not marked by the repudiation of the feminine, there are at least two difficulties with such generalizations. First, the critic mistakes the synchronic variety of images of men for diachronic change. From a historical perspective, there have always been images of men who do not fit the hegemonic pattern (just as there have always been images of women who do not fit conventional femininity). Second, as with much popular criticism, the critic fails to acknowledge that unreconstructed male characters have not disappeared from prime-time television with the advent of liberated male characters (Tancil & Banks, 1990). Furthermore, while television may offer a range of images of men, such redemptive readings do not address the ideological work that exceptions to the hegemonic pattern do, within a relatively stable framework of patriarchal codings of gender roles and relations, marriage, and the family.

These codings of masculinity also intersect with social class in ways that express the tension between the gender regime and the social class structure. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind Aronowitz’s (1989) argument that the representation of working-class males disappeared in the mid-1970s as “working class identity was displaced to other upwardly mobile occupations (e.g., police, football players, and other sites where conventional masculine roles are ubiquitous)” (p. 141). According to Butsch (1991), the numbers of working-class domestic situation comedies peaked in the mid-1950s and the early 1970s; middle-class series predominated throughout the 1980s, despite the recent revival of working-class series (e.g., Family Matters, Roseanne, The Simpsons, and Married with Children). Images of white-collar professionals and managers define the particular “masculinity” of upwardly mobile, white, liberal, middle-class men. In middle-class domestic comedy series, as well as in some dramas, (e.g., L.A. Law), middle-class codes valorize the construction of images of “soft” men.

For example, the series thirtysomething represents a form of domestic situation melodrama that discursively constructs an image of men that clearly deemphasizes signs of dominance and authority. Middle-class codes of therapeutic culture valorize the expression of emotions, an openness to domestic concerns, and greater responsiveness to interpersonal relationships. thirtysomething’s “new view of manhood” entails a version of masculine discourse that incorporates elements of the critique of domestic patriarchy, enabling it to more efficaciously address the social situation of white, middle-class, professional, heterosexual members of the “baby boom” generation living within dual-career marriages. As Loeb (1990) suggests, the notion of “provider” is “defined to include sensitivity, support, and commitment to the emotional needs of the family”; yet, the images of quasi-equality between men (and women) in thirtysomething support and maintain core elements of patriarchal ideology. Unlike traditional melodrama, which problematizes female sexuality, the series is crucially concerned with male (hetero)sexuality (Torres, 1989). In fact, the regular male character (Gary Sheppard) who was the most politically liberal, who occasionally gave voice to the critique of the dominant mode of male sexuality (and therefore might have been seen as being on the side of women’s desires), was killed in the February 12, 1991, episode. In this way, thirtysomething constructs a conservative masculinity that remains complicit with patriarchal ideology, masking and displacing real gender inequalities, and effacing any further critique of dominant gender ideology.

In Hall’s terms, this form of televisial discourse works hegemonically to produce an “achieved complementarity between hegemonic and subordinate classes and their cultures” (1982, p. 334). In thirtysomething, the relations between the genders are made sense of not in terms of male domination and female subordination, but in terms of the organization of affect—feelings of solidarity and jealousy among friends and married and unmarried couples—and relations of compatibility and incompatibility with other members of the professional, managerial class. Moreover, there is a close correspondence between thirtysomething’s definition of gender relations and the reorganization of work within an
expanding postindustrial economy. As more and more people are employed in the managerial-service sector, more of us do work that depends on emphatic communication and for which therapy serves as a model rather than a contrast (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1986, p. 123). Furthermore:

The same sort of interpersonal communication runs the gamut from work to love and back again. Co-workers “give each other therapy” to cement teamwork. Individuals who meet only on the job make use of intimacy as a method to become more effective as a working “unit.” Their sensitive and caring conversation is not a break from the job. It’s part of the job (Bellah et al., 1986, p. 123).

The middle-class verbosity of thirtysomething’s characters, and the mediations they typically engage in at home or at work, symbolically condense and displace the whole field of organizational and professional politics into the domain of personal motivations and feelings. In this way, thirtysomething’s image of manhood is complementary with postindustrial capitalism and the changing organization of work.

So while the men of thirtysomething appear to be less sexist than their more macho counterparts in masculine narratives, the series perpetuates the myth that middle-class, professional men are less sexist than working-class men or third world men (Brod, 1987). Moreover, according to Hearn (1987), the professions are one of the four major institutions of patriarchy (along with hierarchic sexuality, fatherhood, and the state). The “new view of manhood” is the expression of the cultural ascendency of the professional/managerial class, that is to say, white, middle-class, men’s concerns, on the terrain of yuppie common sense.

Subordinated Masculinity

Having considered hegemonic and conservative masculinity, I shall now turn to a brief discussion of television’s construction of subordinated masculinity, through its images of gay men.

In the case of gay men (and lesbian women), hegemonic ideology works through exclusion (Gitlin, 1987), or what Gross (1989) and others have termed “symbolic annihilation.” By and large, gay men (and lesbian women even more so) are rarely featured as regular major characters in prime-time television series. More than likely, as Gross argues, gay men are negatively stereotyped as villains or victims of ridicule (e.g., In Living Color).

However, there have been some exceptions to this pattern of invisibility that suggest that hegemonic masculinity operates through inclusion as well as exclusion: Love, Sydney; Dynasty; Hooperman; Doctor Doctor; Roseanne; the cable television show Brothers; The Tracey Ullman Show; and thirtysomething have featured regular major or minor gay male characters. For example, the series thirtysomething featured one minor gay character, and his positioning as the friend of one of the regular, single, female characters appeared to add an element of urban realism to the courtship situation of single women searching for single, heterosexual men. Instead, this portrayal perpetuates the stereotype that only people involved in the art world maintain friendships with homosexuals. Other series’ subplots have involved the one-time appearance of gay male characters; for instance, L.A. Law has had subplots dealing with an AIDS-related “mercy killing” and the issue of “outing,” referencing real-life stories in the news. There has also been the occasional gay story in made-for-TV movies (e.g., An Early Frost, Welcome Home Bobby). Such representations of gyness, however, do not necessarily assume a gay perspective. In fact, as Henry (1987) points out, such programming “typically takes the point of view of straight[s] struggling to understand” and constructs gay masculinity as a “moral” problem that causes considerable anguish and pain for straight characters. Gay (and lesbian) characters rarely appear when his/her gyness is not a problem, a subject of controversy, or associated with AIDS. In general, while the appearance of some gay male characters or themes may suggest a certain level of acceptance of homosexual individuals, the way in which gyness is constructed tends to define homosexuality as a negative symbol of masculine identity.

Conclusions

The above analysis should be considered preliminary. I have tried to suggest that the process of cultural hegemony may be far more expansive than the analyses of action adventure or law enforcement/crime genres have suggested. Television works hegemonically, not only by imposing dominant (masculinist) ideology but also by “articulating the relations between a series of ideologies (subordinate as well as dominant),
overlapping them on to one another, so as to bring about certain movements and reformations of subjectivity" (Bennett & Woollacott, 1987, p. 5). Thus, one way in which conflicts in gender relations may be handled and defused is through the construction of a social definition of masculinity (sensitive, nurturing, emotionally expressive) that is more open to the work of maintaining interpersonal relationships and child rearing and more accommodating of traditionally feminine connotations and values. The key question is not whether such a version of masculinity is more modern or less (heterosexual) than traditional, hegemonic conceptions of the male role (naturalized in the form of the hero or hero team), but how masculinity is defined and re-defined in order to remain hegemonic (see Gitlin, 1987). As Brittan (1989, p. 187) has argued, "hegemonic masculinity is able to defuse crisis tendencies in the gender order by using counter and oppositional discourses for its own purposes."

Hegemonic masculinity thus works through a variety of representational strategies, including images of feminized masculinity and the construction of negative symbols of masculinity, in order to win the consent of male and female viewers, who, as social agents, may be situated very differently. The gender regime of television is marked by a degree of instability and contradiction; however, hegemonic masculinity must continually be reconstituted through specific representations of masculinity, and the strategies by which hegemonic masculinity is achieved, and ideological consent won or lost, varies.

As some structuralist-thinking analysts have shown, patriarchal ideology in television is encoded through the representation of clear-cut differences that define masculinity and its characteristics as "strong," and femininity and its characteristics as "weak." Hegemonic masculinity may also work through the inversion of differences, as it does in popular culture expressions of antifeminist ideology. As Ehrenreich (1983, p. 163) states, "New Right ideology inverts the traditional imagery of gender roles: Men are 'passive,' 'fragile'; while women are 'active' and 'can do everything.' " Or, as I have tried to suggest here, hegemonic masculinity can work through the leveling of some gender differences, by constructing feminized men who are more open to domestic concerns and interpersonal relationships. This form of masculine/feminine discourse represents male and female interests as basically identical. Finally, the hegemonic process also operates through the exclusion, as well as inclusion, of subordinated masculinities, thus supporting and maintaining a gender hierarchy among men that justifies and legitimizes the (often violent) oppression of gay men. The overall cultural effect of this ongoing process is that questions of power, real gender inequities, capitalist work relations, and sexual politics are glossed over. Apparent modifications of hegemonic masculinity may represent some shift in the cultural meanings of masculinity without an accompanying shift in dominant social structural arrangements, thereby recuperating patriarchal ideology by making it more adaptable to contemporary social conditions and more able to accommodate counter-hegemonic forces, such as liberal-feminist ideology and gay/lesbian politics.

This analysis is a tentative step towards understanding television's discursive construction of masculinity. The exact relationship between hegemonic, conservative, and subordinated masculinities cannot be determined by textual analysis alone; whether television works ideologically to stabilize (or modify) gendered subject positions can only be determined through historical analysis. We might expect, perhaps, that these social definitions of masculinity may be ignored, negotiated, or resisted by some viewers and not others; different strategies of representational practice may articulate in different ways to historically specific "subject" positions, social identities, or social formations. However, if Press's (1989) work is any indication, it appears that hegemonic ideology reaches male and female viewers in class (and other socially) specific ways.

Finally, following Ebert's (1988) advice, male scholars seeking to advance the critical study of gender and the media should be careful to avoid falling prey to the "progressive" fallacy in which any changes in images of male and female characters are taken as the displacement of dominant gender ideologies. In this regard, Galperin (1988) notes that the "feminization" of prime-time is unlikely and "that prime-time soaps such as Dallas and Dynasty actively mitigate the revolutionary currents of their daytime counterparts..." (p. 160). Significant social change in the direction of gender equality will require more than the "new view of manhood" offered by prime-time television. There is also a need for male scholars to engage in counter-hegemonic "readings" and political critiques of television's ideological practices in order to better understand television's role in the reproduction of power relations—the power of men over women, or the power of heterosexuals over homosexuals. For male scholars interested in the relationship between television and gender, this will not be possible as long as "masculinity" remains invisible to ourselves.
Note

1. The term *gender regime*, which refers to the "state of play in gender relations in a given institution," is from Connell (1987).