

WOMEN EMANCIPATED, REALLY? – ROLE OF MEDIA AND CAPITALIST SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at a variety of television advertisements, giving principal importance to the representation of women in these advertisements. Women in today's post-feminist modern era are studied in a critical light as represented in the commercials, as having the focal place in the ad or as shown in the background. The focus of the present research is to see how emancipated are the women of today, especially in the times when Feminism as a literary and social movement is becoming unpopular in literary circles. Also, this paper will look into the invisible ideological bindings which have a remarkable effect on the psyche of the audience watching those advertisements.

Key-words: Advertisement, Feminism, Gramsci, Women, Media.

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In this twenty-first century, women have attained freedom and rights to a large extent since the feminist struggle started in 1960s. Generally termed as first wave and second wave feminism, today's feminism (third wave) is different from these movements of the past. Whereas the earlier movements focussed on equal rights, voting rights, abortion and divorce rights, inheritance rights, etc., today's feminists seek psychological and ideological freedom from the 'ideal' woman as still propagated through various channels such as films, soap-operas, advertisements, etc. Whereas the earlier feminisms used to be a grouped effort, the present feminism is an individual forte, with every person with her own view of what feminism means to *them*. In fact, the term 'feminist' is being shunned by a large number of writers and people, as they associate the term with being a 'man-hater'. Jessica Valenti, author of *Full Frontal Feminism* and founder of the US website *feministing.com*, says, "What I love about the third wave is that we've learned how to find feminism in everything—and make it our own . . . Is there anything wrong with being ugly, fat or hairy? Of course not. But let's be honest. No one wants to be associated with something that is seen as un-cool and unattractive".¹ Today many forms of feminisms are prevalent, for instance, radical feminists, liberal feminists, socialist feminists, black feminists, post-modern or just individualistic view of self-i.e. shunning the tag of 'feminist'.² The definition of feminism has obviously been changing since its very inception, but today it seems that what feminists were fighting against has somehow become the definition of liberation. Women's body is being sold in media in various ways. Yes women earn a lot, but at what cost? In this age when women are economically independent, what is left to achieve?

Helen Gilbert, in her article "Introduction to Marxist Feminism" points out that Frederick Engels in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, sketched and depicted how the matrilineal societies, which were communal and in harmony with nature, were brutally supplanted with patriarchal societies whose fundamental features were wealth and private property. Beset by hunger of power, violence, conquest, imperialism, matrilineal societies were relegated to the margins of the societies or the women became domestic slaves; powerless in the manner of the male society. Helen writes that:

Marx and Engels viewed women's entry into the paid labour force as the first step toward liberating women from stifling dependence on men, though it does not free them from the class oppression they share with male workers. To achieve the full liberation of women and of the multi-racial, working class of all nations, international socialism is necessary, which is in essence a return in modern form to the cooperative egalitarian foundations of early human existence.

Hence, according to Engels and the Marxist theory, the economic freedom is the first step in the liberation of women, and the last step is a global revolution by the working class, with no distinction of the sexes, which will over-throw the exploitative capitalism and come about full circle with socialism.

The first step has been achieved by a large number of women, even in developing countries, but when and how the international revolution will take place, no one is to say. Hence, the Gramscian theory of social function of intellectuals and the importance of ideas becomes significant to look at. He differentiated between the traditional and modern intellectuals. According to Gramsci as told in the book *Selections from Prison Notebooks*:

Intellectuals of the urban type have grown up along with industry and are linked to its fortunes. Their function can be compared to that of subaltern officers in the army. They have no autonomous initiative in elaborating plans for construction. Their job is to articulate the relationship between the entrepreneur and the instrumental mass and to carry out the immediate execution of the production plan decided by the industrial general staff, controlling the elementary stages of work. On the whole the average urban intellectuals are very standardised, while the top urban intellectuals are more and more identified with the industrial general staff itself.

Intellectuals of the rural type are for the most part "traditional", that is they are linked to the social mass of country people and the town (particularly small-town) petite bourgeoisie, not as yet elaborated and set in motion by the capitalist system. This type of intellectual brings into contact the peasant masses with the local and state administration (lawyers, notaries, etc.). (148)

He saw urban intellectuals as directors who generated hegemony by means of ideological apparatuses such as education and the media. He distinguished "traditional" intellectuals articulate, through the language of culture, the feelings and experiences which the masses could not express for themselves. Hence, Gramsci indicates the need of such an education which will develop the working-class intellectuals, who will refurbish or renew the status quo existing in the society.

Hence, not just the economical aspect, but the ideological aspect has become important in assessing the level of women liberation. This paper examines the role of media, especially advertisements (and hence, indirectly capitalism) in respect to the popular notion that women are liberated and possess free will in today's age.

The mass media are diversified media technologies that are intended to reach a large audience by mass communication. According to Roger Silverstone in his book *Media and Morality*:

Media work...is actually boundless. It spills over. It involves audiences and readers, as well as producers and participants. It involves the continuities of talk, of response and rejection, as what is seen and heard, understood or misunderstood, loved or hated, is incorporated, both unconsciously and unconsciously, into the cultures of everyday. In these continuities and complexities of practice, the media becomes a multiply reflexive project, one in which we can take what appears on screen and page not merely as read, but as providing many of the secondary, if not the primary, resources for being and living. The media, then, are not the only locus of reflexivity in this, the late modern world, but they are one of its key stimuli, and they themselves are, or indeed should be, the objects of reflection and criticism. The media are both contained by, and are the container of, the everyday. (20)

Television, film, radio, newspapers and the internet are few broad forms of media. Media – like language systems – are structured through a set of rules, codes and values that make them highly prone to ideological constructions of meaning, or what Barthes refer to as myths. Baudrillard argues that postmodern societies – saturated by media and information technologies – have entered an age of simulation, and more particularly an age of third-order simulation. First-order and second-order simulation maintain a relationship between reality and representations of reality, whereas third-order no longer represent real things but serve to mask this absence of reality.³ According to Stuart Hall, television is a primary myth-maker – constructor of ideology. According to the Cultivation Theory, television cultivates the minds of viewers over long periods of time and is likely to reiterate, confirm, and nourish their values and perspectives (20).⁴ Commercials form the common and a very crucial element of all these forms of media. Advertising, in Latin, *ad vertere* means “to turn the mind toward” and is generally defined as a form of communication for marketing and is used to encourage or persuade an audience (viewers, readers or listeners; sometimes a specific group) to continue or take some new action. Most common form of advertising is the one which encourages the consumer to buy the offered service; other forms may include political and ideological advertising as well. Advertising is a huge industry with \$467 billion expenses worldwide and involve top professionals and intellectuals in the field.

Advertisements may include audio-visual aspects, or only visual or audio. In television and radio voiceovers are used, whereas in print media, advertisements depend upon the written word and the images. Hence, on a linguistic level, ads use language as well as images, which are being studied in this paper to understand how commercials affect women in general. As Horst Ruthrof says in his book *The Body in Language*, “The manner of presenting the world via language as activated by non-verbal signs remains a major aspect of communication and should be regarded as a significant level of analysis in the critique of culture.”⁵

Judith Williamson answers the question that how do ads signify their ideology. She says that “ads construct the ideological meaning not on the level of overt signified but via the signifiers”. Advertisements almost always have two meanings: one being what is spoken (signified) i.e. to sell a product, another, which is unsaid and is realised through images, both of body and surroundings (signifiers). She says that “the signifier of the overt meaning in an advertisement has a function of its own, a place in the process of creating another, less obvious meaning.”⁶ They are replete with hidden meanings and symbols, which act on the psychology of the person unconsciously. When a person sees an ad with a good-looking, willing to please her family, healthy woman in kitchen, with happy and hungry family at the dining table, the image of what a happy family is like gets imprinted on the mind. The product may be Maggie or frozen vegetables, the image of women providing for her family is reinforced. And it’s not just the woman, it’s a happy woman, it’s a pretty, attractive and smartly dressed woman who is projected on the screen, which is usually far from reality. The kind of woman show-cased on television and elsewhere as the ‘ideal’ woman constitutes only the five percent of total population of women. This distorts the idea of beauty and shapes the psyche of men as well as women to have unreal expectations of each other as well as of themselves. So many factors are at work in a ten second video, though seemingly very innocent, but in reality very potent and significant, not to say damaging to the psyche.

Researchers have found that stereotypes can have a negative effect on women themselves. According to a research done by Geis in 1984, women may perceive the ‘happy housewife’ stereotype as a cultural directive which in turn may lead them to put aside their own desires regarding career and personal life and replace them with the ‘ideal’ presented through popular culture including advertisements. One of the first studies that talked about the image of women in television commercials was by Bardwick and Schumann (1967), who examined the depictions of female and male roles in television advertisements and reached the conclusion that women are portrayed primarily as homebound or as housewives.⁷ Another study by Gaye Tuchman shows that mass media such as television act as ‘agents of socialization’ in encouraging female viewers to think about marriage ahead of their careers.

Hence, the examination of the advertisements becomes very important because an average person watches and gathers so many messages in one day from these advertisements, which in turn form her/his psychology. Not just television, magazines, internet, bill-boards, buses, infomercials, everywhere one is surrounded by subtle messages and images. Even if one critically sees the emoticons on web and phone applications like WhatsApp, it becomes evident that women are confined to looking like angels or a bride or dancing and acting in a charming fashion. The emoticons for males include various professions, running, swimming etc. Also,

women's undergarments form the part of the smileys, but not men's. Hence, such are the kind of hidden symbols which unconsciously condition our psychology and sends messages to the public that female is a sex object, which is one of the major reasons of sexual assaults on women.

Another important aspect of this study is Laura Mulvey's theory of male gaze, in her article entitled 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975). According to her:

Male characters are 'bearers of the look' which is aimed, quite often, at physically desirable, sexually submissive female characters. The spectators watch cinematic films through the eyes of the dominant male protagonists and are implicitly addressed as though we were men desiring heterosexual pleasures, even if we are heterosexual women or homosexuals. Women connote 'to-be-looked-at-ness', men are doing the 'looking'.

Mulvey also applies Lacan's ideas to cinema spectatorship. She says that cinema screen functions in a similar way for spectators as mirror functions for infants. Spectators imagine the actors as their superior reflection and aim to become like them.⁸

Another research done by Angela McRobbie on teenage girls' magazine and pop music shows how such magazines by including articles about romantic short stories, how to dress up, ways to make and keep a boyfriend etc condition young girls into continuing into adulthood confirming to the societal standards of what a woman should be, without any conflict.⁹ An advertisement on washing machine Whirlpool shows how a little girl can wash clothes in a machine (the product to be sold). Such kind of propagation saturates the mindset and makes the viewers confirm to their belief of the future role of that little girl. In another advertisement on Parle G biscuits, small boys are seen roller skating on the road outside even though he has broken his leg, but a girl is shown inside the home playing with toy robots. This habituates the mind to the age-old belief that woman's place is inside the home. Also, in a promotional advertisement by a reality show *Nach Baliye*, the previous episode winner couples were invited to perform again. It was shown that their husbands had the knowledge about the proceedings, whereas the wives were kept in dark, as a surprise to them. Hence, showing that the information guardians are the men, not women.

Judith Butler argues that gender identities are not natural or fixed; rather they are only given meaning when *acted out* or performed. She says that 'the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts'. She believes that the traditional lines of division between feminine and masculine identity are capable of being blurred and eroded by gender playing that subverts conventional sex differences; that amounts to troublesome gender performativity in the eyes of traditionalists. According to her, transsexual practices, transvestism and bisexuality are important ways to create gender trouble because they contradict normative femininities and masculinities.¹⁰

Moving deeper, it's the capitalist (or neo-imperialist) society which has only one goal, i.e. profit. According to Habermas as given in Dan Laughey's book *Key Themes in Media Theory*, the popular, consumer-oriented press was released from the pressure to take sides ideologically by the all-important profit motive (50).¹¹ This huge industry of advertising is not just driven by showing the features of the products; it plays with the mind of the viewer. At some level, it reinforces the already present or past stereotypes about gender roles, but also, it forms new images, to which people are supposed to fit to be accepted in the society. The advertisements don't appeal to the viewer; ironically, it makes the viewer vulnerable and forms the mentality to plead to the product to transform her/him into whatever the product promises to do. Habermas considers modern-day consumers to be hoodwinked into 'constant consumption training' that shapes public opinion into a soft exchange of views – about the latest washing-up liquid, or the new release video game, or the next generation of mobile phones – instead of hard, serious discussion about the politics and policies of the day (51). That is a very sad state of a society. The logical thing would be that products are for people, not that people change themselves for the products. This is the evil of capitalism, especially advertising. According to Habermas, this advanced capitalist phase of modernity effectively transformed the public sphere from a culture-debating to culture-consuming one (49). Here the Gramsci's notion of role of intellectuals becomes important.

The advertisements are of various kinds and of all products. For the purpose of this study, I will focus on the reinforcing of gender stereotypes ads, use of sex and commodification of women in ads, propagating beauty myths and colour of skin stereotypes to sell various products.

Whenever one thinks of a cleaning product, or a kitchen/food product, the image that comes to mind is of a happy beautiful woman. Even hundred years before, the situation was the same. Think about cars, insurance etc, the protagonist will always be a male, the protector of his wife and children. Not that this is always the case, but inherent ideology about gender remains the same. In another car ad, the protagonist is a businesswoman, driving away from the city leisurely, to have peace. In most of other ads, the male protagonist is seen showing his strength or projects his 'male strength' through the vehicle. If both man and woman are there, it's always the man who is driving. In the ad of Nissan Micra, Ranbir Kapoor is seen driving the car through a heavy traffic, with a woman sitting on the passenger seat. Superficially the car promotes the usefulness of its small size, intrinsically presents a picture of a man driving through tough heavy traffic, hence adding to the belief that men are better drivers than women. There are innumerable examples alone in the advertisements about cars that show that cars are the lone forte of men. Also, women are present in commercials where they are not even required. Courtney and Whipple (1974) defined sexual objects as, where women had no role in the commercial, but appeared as an item of decoration. It was also found in a research by Courtney & Whipple (1974) that 87% of voiceovers were male and only 6% of voiceovers were done using females.

Feminists and others concerned about the image of women in popular culture have long placed much of the blame on advertising (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971; Courtney & Whipple, 1974; Dominick & Rauch, 1972). Feminist Germaine Greer berated the media for concentrating on advertisements for "things to squirt on women to stop them from being so offensive" (Dominick & Rauch, 1972). Marijean Suelzle pointed out that commercials "endlessly show women helpless before a pile of soiled laundry until the male voice of authority overrides hers to tell how brand X with its fast-acting enzymes will get her clothes cleaner than clean" (Courtney & Whipple, 1974). However, even if advertising could portray women as self-confident and career oriented, it would still be difficult to change the minds of all those who believe in the 'happy housewife' stereotype. Advertising is a powerful tool for selling, but it can also be a powerful tool for attitude change and behaviour. Hence, the danger of advertising which stereotypes women is that it can lead to forming notions that undermine women and their abilities.

This is how the advertisements reinforce the gendered roles even in the twenty first century. The woman acting in a commercial is apparently a 'liberated' woman, but the way she consents to be show-cased in a 'traditional', meek, beautiful object is objectionable and offensive. The pressure advertisements like this, and more directly of face washes, soaps, cosmetics puts on women to look attractive is immense, can't be even gauged. Not one female is there who hasn't felt the pressure to look beautiful and has felt unimportant and undeserving of love, affection and respect at one time or another. For some it is temporary, for many it's frequent and some go into depression because of it. Commercials like L'Oréal, featuring Aishwarya Rai Bachchan telling you "because you are worth it" is stupefying if one thinks about it. The cosmetics, creams etc. have achieved such a prestigious status that the ordinary public aspires to have, and is ready to pay any price to acquire. Not just that, the new 'liberated' woman is 'worth it'. The money she earns will go into making her look pretty, which she desires and wants to be accepted in the male-dominated society and to fit into the picture of the 'ideal' woman. How is that emancipation? It is the same picture as it was years before, may be even more ghastly and scary. In fact the advent of cosmetics and the commercials after the World War I were considered as symbol of emancipated women. Lipstick and heels were taken as signs of women empowerment as women would then be seen in streets, in job markets looking attractive rather than just home. They were seen to be asserting their identity through such products. Ideally and logically the situation should have changed with changing times, but unfortunately, the status is still that only. In fact, it has deteriorated and transformed women into sex objects, just the technology has advanced. Instead of washing clothes with hands, women are 'liberated' as now fully automatic washing machines are available.

The images that media propagates, what the models and actors are shown to be, what the so called fashionistas and fashion designers 'advise' in the magazines, are diligently followed by the public. Women undergo surgeries to look 'picture-perfect'. Cosmetics surgeries like breast enhancement, nose job, BOTOX injections to look younger, toe shortening, even heel implants for those extra inches are on a rise. Not just that, the rise in sexism in today's culture, called porn culture or new sexism by various researchers, has made normal natural life artificial. The fact that women go for vaginal cosmetic surgery, and not just for medical

reasons but for aesthetic ones, is shocking. But what is even more alarming is that this mind-set is being propagated as being 'liberated'! Women want to emulate what men see in porn films and hence be more desirable. Is this the definition of being liberated? That one remains anchored or tied to a man for one's self-worth and go to any limits to 'hold the man's interest'? It is a matter of utmost importance today that the education structure of society becomes such that it produces intellectuals, not money earning machines. A common person won't even be aware of what these ads and images on television do to her/his psyche. Therefore it is very important that the curriculum does incorporate awareness on such issues and be formed as an important and compulsory subject vital to a student's mental growth.

These were some examples of subtle conditioning of mind by these commercials. Apart from these, the sexist attitudes are also shown in an obvious manner in many advertisements. Calvin Klien, Louis Vitton, Gucci, Gap, Guess, Jimmy Choo, Prada, Fcuk, Diesel, Armani, Gant, Boggi Milano, etc, though being big brands from the developed 'free' countries of the west, such representations are a common feature. Women being naked or provocatively clad, lying on the ground while the man squirts something on her, or is standing over her, a woman advertising men's shoes by keeping them on her naked body or lying on the foot the man wearing those shoes, beer commercials, etc, all these exploit women's body in the grossest way possible, but still people have a huge regard for such expensive brands. The aura associated with them is of being attractive, desirable, posh, modern, something which people feel proud to own, but the values they propagate is as ancient as middle ages and very ugly and crass. Another research on women in print advertisements has shown that pictures of women's bodies and body parts appear more often than pictures of men's bodies (Hall & Crum, 1994). Hall and Crum (1994) addressed the issue of images of women as sex objects and decoration by observing the number and type of body camera shots used in television beer commercials. In addition, Hall and Crum (1994) found that most women in these commercials appeared in either leisurewear or swimwear, whereas the men were always dressed in work clothes. Hall and Crum (1994) suggest that this reinforces the stereotype that women are sex objects, while men work, make decisions and look after women who are not capable of looking after themselves (Hall & Crum, 1994).

The body image and the concept of being 'beautiful' presented on the screen is unreal and dangerous. The picture perfect face, chiselled features, fair glowing skin, zero size figure, or now even the curvy figure is something which is not natural. Originally, the concept of 'curvy' was that a woman is healthy and comfortable in her body; but now, 'curvy' means perfectly calculated curves, with unnaturally slim waist. Hence, the concepts propagated to break the old stereotypes are being re-shaped themselves!

The first book to really examine the scale of the problem was *Female Chauvinist Pigs* by Ariel Levy, published in 2005. Levy identified the development of what she labelled raunch culture:

30 years (my lifetime) ago, our mothers were "burning their bras" and picketing *Playboy*, and suddenly we were getting implants and wearing the bunny logo as supposed symbols of our liberation. How had the culture shifted so drastically in such a short period of time?

She looked at young women and men and how their view of themselves and their relationships was shaped by the dominance of images and clichés of porn. But there was a new twist: raunch culture sold itself as "empowering", a word which has become so detached from its original definition as to be meaningless. Raunch culture is sold to us as a liberated way to express our sexuality and so, paradoxically, it has persuaded us to accept being objectified in ever more crude and shocking ways. This has led to a relentless seepage of values, images, behaviour and dress from the world of selling sex for money into mainstream culture and society. A study by Knill, Pesch, Pursey, Gilpin&Perloff, (1981) was conducted to find whether there had been a change in the stereotype associated with women in the 70s. They found that women were given authority as product representatives. However, these products were used in bathrooms or kitchens. This was the only recorded change. All the previous stereotypes, including women predominantly portrayed as housewives and mothers, still existed (Knill, et al., 1981).

Hence, as it can be seen, the whole media culture is driven by profit motive. In films, advertisements or any other media, there are continuous images which subtly affect our mind and keep conditioning it to the conventional ways of gendered roles. If one sits to watch just advertisements, there will be continuous ads which in one way or the other reinforce sexist attitudes in the society. According to John Berger in his *Ways of Seeing* (1972), there is a political dimension to mass-reproduced advertisements, albeit a sinister one that

favours those in power: 'Publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy. The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of a significant political choice. Publicity helps to mask and compensate for all that is undemocratic within society' (Berger 149) While Third World countries see publicity images as symbols of free choice and democracy, the truth according to Berger is that advertising restricts choice and disengages Western people from serious political issues (40, 41).¹²

The role of media thus becomes very important in today's post-modern society and needs to understand its responsibility. According to Roger Silverstone in *Media and Morality- on the rise of mediapolis*, "the media, it now appears, carry a huge, one might even say an impossible burden of representation (54)." He says that:

...the media have lost their role as guardians of the public good, that they are no longer an effective fourth estate, and that their current practices are being pursued without regard to basic ethics to their responsibilities and duties to citizens and states (21).

Not just the media, the viewers, the community also have a role to play. Silverstone says that: The media, in all their differentiation, do have responsibilities and indeed these responsibilities are not confined only to the nuts and bolts of reporting and representation...but the reverse is also true. It is that we (readers, audiences, citizens) need to take responsibility for our media. Our dependence on them is no longer at issue. That dependence therefore, can no longer be innocent (21, 22).

To sum up, Horst Ruthrof in *The Body in Language* says that:

If the community trains its members to imagine the world in similar ways, individual nonverbal readings lose their importance. In a world such as ours in which televisual standardization of images is a powerful formation of how we see the world, individual nonverbal deviance is significantly reduced (139).

It may be true, that is why awareness is needed so that we can see what is not shown and read what is not written. There is a need for such intellectuals who along with finding means to sell their products, must be considerate about what kind of images they are presenting to the public. For instance, Dove came up with an idea about selling their soap without using models or photoshopped women. Instead they presented real woman with "imperfections" to sell their product. No doubt it is their money-making technique, but it did not put forward the unrealistic view of beauty and hence, adversely affect the psyche of its viewers.

End Notes

1. To read the whole article, see Orr, Judith. *International Socialism. Marxism and Feminism Today*.
2. To read more in detail, see Laughey, Dan. *Key Themes in Media Theory. Feminisms and Gender*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2008. Print. 100-120.
3. To know more about it, see Laughey, Dan. *Key Themes in Media Theory. Baudrillard: Hyperreality and Simulation*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2008. Print. 147-168.
4. To read about the theory in detail, see Laughey, Dan. *Key Themes in Media Theory. Cultivation Theory*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2008. Print. 7-28.
5. For more Structuralist aspects, see Ruthrof, Horst. *The Body in Language*. London and New York: Cassel, 2000. Print.
6. To see more studies by researchers on the issue, see Shirikhande, Vaishali. *Stereotyping of Women in Television Advertisements..*
7. Laughey, Dan. *Key Themes in Media Theory. Structuralism and Semiotics*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2008. Print. 67-68.
8. To read more about male gaze, see Laughey, Dan. *Key Themes in Media Theory. Feminisms and Gender. Mulvey: the male gaze*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2008. Print. 100-120.
9. For detailed study of the research, see Laughey, Dan. *Key Themes in Media Theory. Feminisms and Gender. McRobbie: The Ideology of Teenage Femininity*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2008. Print. 100-120.
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11. For detailed study, see Laughey, Dan. *Key Themes in Media Theory. Modernity and Medium Theory*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2008. Print. 30-53.

12. For more information, see Laughey, Dan. *Key Themes in Media Theory*. Modernity and Medium Theory. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2008. Print. 30-53.

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