



Source: Doug Pensinger/Getty Images.

Research shows that women's sports receive less coverage than men's sports and that the nature of that coverage often has been stereotypically sexist—though less blatantly so in recent years.

Concern about women's sports coverage extends beyond quantity to include the quality of the coverage that does exist. Early, blatant stereotypical images of women in sports have given way to coverage that is still stereotypical but less obviously so. Studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s found that, on the rare occasions when women athletes were covered on television, they "were likely to be overtly trivialized, infantilized, and sexualized" (Messner, Duncan, and Jensen 1993: 123). According to Schell (1999), women were often portrayed as "sexual objects available for male consumption rather than as competitive athletes."

When Messner and his associates (1993) studied television coverage of the 1989 men's and women's National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and various matches in the 1989 U.S. Open tennis tournament, they found the commentary framed women's and men's sports differently. Gender was constantly "marked" in women's basketball coverage, as in "NCAA Women's National Championship Game" or "women's basketball." In contrast, television coverage referred to men's competition in a universal way, without mentioning gender at all: "The Final Four," "The NCAA National Championship Game," and so on. The naming of athletes also differed by gender. The announcers called women "girls," "young ladies," and "women." They never called men "boys," only "men," "young men," or "young fellas." Commentators covering tennis matches referred to female athletes by first name seven times as often as they did male athletes. In basketball, the ratio was about two to one. Messner and his associates reminded readers that "dominants generally have license to refer to subordinates (younger people, employees, lower-class people, ethnic minorities, women,

etc.) by their first names" (p. 128). Finally, an array of differences appeared in the language used to describe athletes. Male coaches "yelled," while female coaches "screamed." While an excellent shot by a female player was "lucky," excellent play from a male player showed that he was "imposing his will all over this court."

However, coverage has since improved somewhat. In a 2010 report, Messner and Cooky examined ESPN's *SportsCenter* as well as television sports news on the local network affiliates in Los Angeles. They found that stories that trivialize women's sports and sexualize female athletes were now rare, noting that the disparaging portrayals and sexualized humor have largely disappeared from sports news. Instead of sexualized humor and images, which aim to make women's sports attractive to male viewers, one new wrinkle in recent coverage is the focus on women athletes as family members, emphasizing their roles as mothers, wives, or girlfriends—another strategy for attracting male audiences. In general, however, sports reporters have not developed a new approach to covering women's sports. Instead, as Messner and Cooky point out, when sports news programs stopped portraying women athletes in trivial and sexualized ways, the overall amount of coverage of women's sports on television declined. Ultimately, as these studies demonstrate, coverage of women's sports is symptomatic of the subtle ways in which media both reflect and re-create gender inequality.

It is possible that the Internet may provide new opportunities for more in-depth and substantive coverage of women's sports. One recent study (Kian, Mondello, and Vincent 2009) found that ESPN.com focused substantial attention on the 2006 NCAA women's basketball tournament. In the coverage of March Madness that year, 38 percent of the stories on ESPN.com focused on the women's tournament. This stood in sharp contrast to CBSsportsline.com, where only 6 percent of the stories focused on the women's tournament. Because ESPN was broadcasting the complete women's tournament, regular online coverage of women's basketball may have served a valuable promotional role for ESPN. Perhaps more important, Kian and his colleagues report that online coverage did not feature the common gender stereotypes described in studies of television coverage. In particular, they note that "there was a significantly higher proportion of descriptors about the positive skill level/accomplishments and psychological/emotional strengths in women's basketball articles than those on men's basketball" (p. 491). Whether online media will provide a regular forum for more robust coverage of women's sports remains an open question.

CLASS AND THE MEDIA

Interestingly, researchers have not given a great deal of attention to class in media content. There are fewer studies about class in television, for example, than about either race or gender. Yet class permeates media content, and it is useful to examine both the class distribution of people in the media and the roles given to characters of different class status. It is also important to keep in mind the relationship between class and the media industry.

For Advertisers, "Some People Are More Valuable Than Others"

Class underlies the media industry in a distinctive way. Class considerations connect advertisers, producers, content, and audiences. The for-profit, advertiser-driven nature of all

...social media means that advertisers are keenly interested in the economic status of media consumers. They want to reach people with enough disposable income to buy their products. You can guess which class a media product reaches by examining the ads that accompany it. Everybody has to buy toothpaste and breakfast cereal, but when a program or publication features ads for jewelry, expensive cars, and investment services, you know it is aimed at an affluent audience. (Take a look at the Sunday morning talk shows, for example. Whom do you think advertisers are trying to reach?) Media outlets, in turn, want to attract affluent consumers and often gear their content to a more affluent reader or viewer.

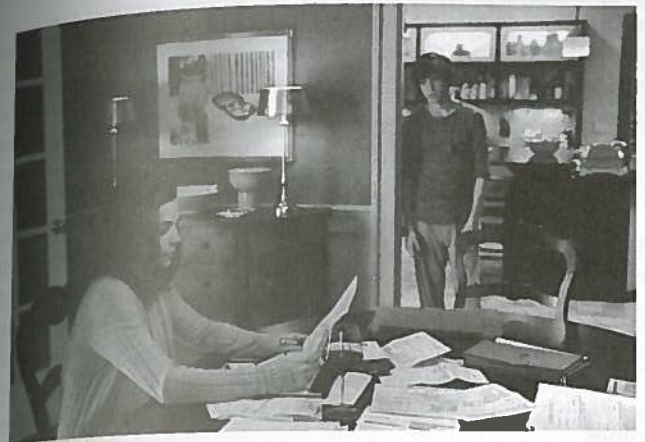
The influence of class can sometimes take on strange dimensions. For example, one of the lesser-known strategies sometimes employed in the newspaper business is to *reduce* circulation to increase profits. While at first this may seem to be an impossible strategy, here is how publishers make it work. Newspapers receive about two thirds of their revenue from advertisers, not readers; therefore, they must be sensitive to advertiser needs to stay in business. In turn, as noted above, advertisers want to reach only readers with enough disposable income to buy their products. In the information that major newspapers send to potential advertisers, they usually tout the affluence of the consumers who read their paper because these are the readers advertisers want to reach. To sell advertising space at a premium, newspapers want to improve the demographic profile (in terms of average household income) of their readership. They can do this in two ways: Attract more affluent readers and/or get rid of poorer readers.

The first approach is reflected in media content that is clearly aimed at more affluent households. This content includes major business sections with extensive stock market reports and "Style" sections with articles that highlight fashion, culture, restaurants, and other upscale consumer activities. The second strategy is more direct. Some papers have made it difficult for poor people to buy their product. Publishers sometimes limit the paper's distribution in poor neighborhoods and in some cases even raise the price of the paper in these areas while reducing it in wealthier areas! In the 1990s, the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, raised its daily sales price in inner-city neighborhoods from 35 cents to 50 cents. At the same time, it reduced the price to 25 cents in affluent surrounding counties (Cole 1995).

Newspaper publishers are not the only ones who recognize that affluent people are more important for the media industry than poor or working-class people. In the 1970s, ABC issued a profile of its viewing audience, highlighting its desirable demographics. The network titled the profile "Some People Are More Valuable Than Others" (Wilson, Gutierrez, and Chao 2012: 25). It is important, therefore, to keep in mind the underlying profit-oriented nature of the media when we examine class in media content.

Class and Media Content

Overwhelmingly, the American society portrayed in the media is wealthier than it is in the real world. The real world is predominantly working or lower-middle class, with the vast majority of Americans working in service, clerical, or production jobs. Media, however, portray the social world as one heavily populated by the middle class—especially



CBS's legal and political drama, *The Good Wife*, is one of many programs that is set in an upper-middle-class environment, with an affluent home and furnishings. There is a gourmet kitchen in the background, elegant dining room furniture, stylish wall sconces, and tastefully framed artwork.

Source: CBS Photo Archive/Getty Images.



In contrast to the usual middle-class fare, the set of CBS's comedy, *2 Broke Girls*, suggests something closer to reality for working-class Americans of more modest means. While quite large for a Brooklyn apartment, the kitchen features an aging refrigerator, old-fashioned linoleum flooring, a utility sink, and rough shelving—certainly not an upper-middle-class gourmet kitchen.

Source: AF archive/Alamy.

Social Class in Prime-Time Programs. The class status of television characters is communicated to viewers in various ways, one of which is the set used to represent home life, as seen here in two contrasting programs.

middle-class professionals. Images showing the comfortable, middle-class life fill magazines, films, and television programs. These images are most obvious in advertising. Simply put, advertisements aimed at selling products do not feature poor people and rarely feature working-class people. Instead, comfortable middle-class and affluent upper-class images reign in ads.

Family-Based Situation Comedies

Entertainment is little different from advertising. Butsch (2003) examined 315 family-based situation comedies that aired from 1946 to 2000. Because programs based in a workplace—such as police shows—would dictate the occupation of the main characters, he intentionally excluded these. The focus of domestic-based situation comedies is home life away from work. Thus, creators of such programs are free to give their characters a wide range of potential occupations. Butsch found that only 14 percent of such programs featured blue-collar, clerical, or service workers as heads of the household. More than two thirds (68%) of home-based situation comedies featured middle-class families. And the adults in these television families weren't your run-of-the-mill professionals, either. The elite professions were vastly overrepresented. Doctors outnumbered nurses 9 to 1, professors outnumbered schoolteachers 4 to 1, and lawyers outnumbered less glamorous accountants 10 to 1. All these high-paying jobs for television characters meant lots of disposable income, and families in these situation comedies overwhelmingly lived in beautiful middle-class homes equipped with all the amenities.

There is an exception to the relative scarcity of working-class characters on sitcoms: animated programs. Ever since Fred in *The Flintstones* was written as a rock quarry "crane" operator, prime-time animated comedies have highlighted working-class characters. Peter Griffin of *Family Guy* was a blue-collar worker; Cleveland Brown in *The Cleveland Show* was a cable installer; *King of the Hill* featured a propane salesman; and Homer in the long-running program *The Simpsons* was a woefully underqualified technician in a nuclear power plant. The prominence of the working class in cartoon portrayals contrasts sharply with its scarcity in live-action programs.

In recent years, *2 Broke Girls* and *The Middle* have each dealt with working-class life in different ways, but few other prime-time broadcast programs have. The exceptions to the relative absence of prominent, working-class characters are notable precisely because there have been so few of them. Doug Heffernan in *King of Queens* (1998–2007) was a deliveryman, and his wife was a secretary. The main character in *Roseanne* (1988–1997) held various jobs, including a factory worker, waitress, and shampooer in a beauty salon, while her husband struggled as a construction worker and mechanic. Al Bundy, the father in the highly dysfunctional family on *Married With Children* (1987–1997), was a shoe salesman. Harriet Winslow, the mother on *Family Matters* (1989–1997), worked various jobs in a department store while her husband, Carl, was a police officer. Archie Bunker from *All in the Family* (1971–1979) was a bigoted dock worker. *Good Times* (1974–1979) featured a working-poor family in Chicago's housing projects; Florida was a former maid and her husband, James, fought unemployment, sometimes working two low-paying jobs when he could find them. Ralph in *The Honeymooners* (1955–1956) was a bus driver. Interestingly, such working-class programs often highlighted their characters' aspirations for middle-class life through the launching of small businesses. For example, Archie Bunker became a bar owner in the later program, *Archie's Place* (1979–1983). Both parents on *Roseanne* opened up businesses of their own: an unsuccessful motorcycle shop and a diner. The title characters in *2 Broke Girls* are trying to save enough money to start their own business.

In contrast to the relatively few portrayals of working-class families, there are a large number of domestic-based situation comedies in which the head of the household had a

middle-class job. The list of lawyers, doctors, architects, advertising executives, journalists, and businesspeople on such programs is a long one. Butsch (2003) argues that the predominance of middle-class characters in these television situation comedies conveys a subtle but significant message. The few working-class characters who do populate some programs are the deviant exception to the norm, and therefore, it must be their own fault that they are less economically successful. (This observation is quite similar to the one Gray [1989] made when examining the portrayal of blacks in the media. As you may remember, Gray argued that middle-class blacks on entertainment programs were the "norm" against which real-life blacks in the news were contrasted.)

The message that people in the working class are responsible for their fate is a quintessential middle-class idea that ignores the structural conditions that shape social class. It is also an idea reinforced by another tendency identified by Butsch (2003). In contrast to most middle-class television families, the father in working-class families is usually ridiculed as an incompetent, though sometimes lovable, buffoon. Ralph Kramden, Fred Flintstone, Cleveland Brown, Peter Griffin, Doug Heffernan, Al Bundy, and Homer Simpson are perhaps the most obvious cases. All, to varying degrees, were simpletons who pursued foolish get-rich schemes and wound up in trouble because they simply weren't very smart. Each of these shows portrayed the female main character as more levelheaded and in control. Often, these programs even portrayed the children of working-class men as smarter and more competent than their fathers. In fact, Butsch (2005) argues that television representations of working-class men have followed a relatively standard script for five decades.

While there have been variations and exceptions, the stock character of the ineffectual, even buffoonish, working-class man has persisted as the dominant image. In the prime-time tapestry he is contrasted with consistently competent working-class wives and children and manly middle-class fathers—a composite image in which working-class men are demasculinized and their class status justified. (p. 133)

Butsch (2003) acknowledges that this kind of program sometimes also ridiculed middle-class fathers but not nearly as often as working-class fathers. Instead, the norm in comedies with middle-class families—from *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver* to *Bewitched* and the *Brady Bunch* to the *Cosby Show* and *The Wonder Years*—is for middle-class fathers to be competent at their jobs and often to be wise and capable parents. The implication, argues Butsch, is that working-class families struggle because of incompetence and lack of intelligence, while middle-class families succeed because of competence and intelligence. Such images help reinforce the idea that class-based inequality is just and functional.

Tabloid Talk Shows and Hollywood Films

Daytime television talk shows and Hollywood movies are two other media genres where class issues are evident. In very distinct ways, each tends to help reinforce myths about class.

Daytime talk shows featuring ordinary citizens first began appearing in the United States in the 1970s but reached their peak of popularity in the 1980s and 1990s. Early daytime talk show pioneer Phil Donahue often featured serious discussion about contested issues

such as abortion, women's rights, and new cultural trends. Defenders of daytime talk shows saw them as providing a unique space for the inclusion of voices that were otherwise ignored. In his study of these programs, Gamson (1998) notes, "Talk shows, defenders claim, give voice to common folks and visibility to invisible folks. . . . Indeed, Donahue and others assert, the talk show genre was and is a 'revolutionary' one. 'It's called democracy,' Donahue argues, 'but [before my program] there were no shows that—every day, let just folks stand up and say what-for. I'm proud of the democracy of the show'" (p. 14).

Such democratization had it benefits. Gamson (1998) credits these talk shows with increasing the visibility of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people in American households. However, especially as the genre evolved over time, the format and structure of these programs presented a wildly distorted take on "common folks." They highlighted tawdry subjects, encouraged conflict, and orchestrated bizarre spectacles, becoming known as "tabloid talk shows" or "trash TV."

As a consequence, one of the only television forums where working-class and poor people were routinely spotlighted ended up perpetuating the myth that such people were undisciplined, violent, lazy, sex-crazed, and generally dysfunctional. Sensationalistic talk shows, such as those hosted by Jerry Springer and Maury Povich, often highlighted particularly extreme lifestyles of people from poor or working-class backgrounds. Sought out precisely for their wild behaviors—and often coached by producers to exaggerate such antics to create dramatic and entertaining television—guests were treated as freak shows to entertain audiences.

Television is not alone in its relative dismissal and distorted representation of working-class people. With some notable exceptions (Zaniello 2003), especially in the early years of filmmaking (Ross 1999), movies have highlighted a myth of classlessness in America, emphasizing opportunities for individual mobility in the form of the classic American Dream rather than seriously addressing structural sources of inequality and the value of working people uniting to promote social change (Bodnar 2006). In fact, this focus on individualism, as opposed to collective action, is another key feature of media content.

The Union Taboo

If media rarely show working-class folks, they are even less likely to show working people in labor unions, despite the fact that more than 14 million Americans belong to a union. And as Puette (1992) has shown, the media's portrayal of unions has been anything but sympathetic. Like the stereotypical images of racial groups and women, the media stereotypes of unions have evolved over the years. After examining the image of labor unions in Hollywood movies, television dramas, TV news, and editorial cartoons, Puette argues that there are some basic "lenses" that color and distort media portrayals of organized labor and its leaders. Among these media images are the stereotypes that unions protect and encourage unproductive, lazy, and insubordinate workers; that unions undermine America's ability to compete internationally; that union leaders, because they do not come from the educated or cultured (privileged) classes, are more likely to be corrupted by power than are business or political leaders; and that unions are no longer necessary. Certainly, unions are far from perfect organizations, and they are fair game for media criticism. However, with

very few exceptions, Puette's analysis points to a systematic and relentless disparagement of the most visible effort at collective empowerment by working Americans.

A decade later Martin (2003) added to the study of media coverage of unions, examining the reasons why the coverage is so poor. His analysis focuses on the idea that media outlets relate to their audiences almost exclusively as consumers, rather than as workers. By focusing on consumer issues, commercial media manage to sidestep the actual questions involved in labor disputes. For example, the news media spends more time highlighting travel delays for passengers than they do on why airline employees have gone on strike. News media conventions also rely on simply reporting "both sides" of the story, rarely informing viewers or readers about the veracity of the conflicting claims. Such coverage is uninformative and tends to portray labor disputes as bickering that is of little relevance to the audience.

The idea of a positive—or at least balanced—portrayal of a labor union is so rare on U.S. television that when one does occur it becomes notable. When the police drama *The Bridge* first appeared on CBS, the *Los Angeles Times* television critic noted that the program would appear foreign to viewers not because it was set in Canada but because of its major storyline. "Americans will know they're viewing an import the moment the uber narrative makes itself clear. 'The Bridge' is about a street cop attempting to rid the force of corruption through . . . wait for it . . . its union" (McNamara 2010). In addition to a rare positive portrayal of a union, the program also highlighted class issues. The show's title refers to a bridge that separates a wealthy Toronto neighborhood from a poor one. The program was canceled after just three episodes aired in the United States but was renewed for another season in more union-friendly Canada.

News Media

Class enters directly into news media content as well. News tends to highlight issues of concern to middle- and upper-class readers and viewers. Take the example of stock market reports. Fewer than half of American families own any stock at all—directly or indirectly (such as through mutual funds, pensions, or retirement accounts). In fact, over 80 percent of the nation's stocks (whether owned directly or indirectly) are owned by just the wealthiest 10 percent of the nation's families (Wolf 2012). Thus, the vast majority of the public is unlikely to be interested in stock reports. Most Americans do not even understand stock listings and reports. Yet stock market reports are a prominent feature of news programs and newspapers. Now think for a moment. When was the last time you saw a news story explaining how to apply for welfare benefits or an extension on unemployment insurance, or reviewing the legal rights of workers to form a union, or to learn about health and safety hazards in the workplace? Even suggesting such stories might seem odd because it contradicts our taken-for-granted notion of what news is "supposed" to be.

On the whole, the news reflects a middle- and upper-class view of the world. In this world, newspaper business pages flourish, but labor reporters are almost an extinct breed. News may address "regular" people as consumers, but it almost never addresses them as workers. Even consumer-oriented stories are scarce because they have the potential to offend advertisers. For example, the *San Jose Mercury News* once published an innocuous feature story advising consumers on how to buy a new car. The prospect of well-informed

...concerned a group of 47 local auto dealers. They retaliated by collaborating and canceling 52 pages of advertising in the paper's weekly "Drive" section—a loss of \$1 million for the paper. While pressure from local car dealers is infamous in the newspaper industry, this time the paper went to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which ruled that the auto dealers had illegally conspired. The dealers reached an agreement with the FTC and agreed not to boycott the newspaper in the future (Chiuy 1995). This episode is a dramatic illustration of how advertisers can influence media content—directly or indirectly. Advertisers do not want media content to interfere with the "buying mood" of the public.

The people who populate news and public affairs programs also represent a skewed sample of American life. "Hard news" usually features people in positions of power, especially politicians, professionals, and corporate executives. We might argue that, for many journalists, the very working definition of news is what those in power say and do. As we saw in Chapter 4, the organizational structure of journalism also favors coverage of the wealthy and powerful. The industry organizes its news beats around powerful political institutions, such as the city hall, the state house, and federal offices. People with substantial resources and influence can also command attention from the media by supplying journalists with packaged information, such as press releases, press conferences, and pseudo-events. The only regular features on working-class and poor people are likely to come from the reporter on the crime beat.

Unlike straight news broadcasts, public affairs programs offer a great deal of flexibility in the list of guests who are invited by producers to comment on and analyze current issues. Yet the class characteristics of the guests on such programs are also heavily skewed toward professionals. On prestigious public affairs programs, politicians and professionals have long dominated the guest lists (Croteau and Hoynes 1994). Representatives of organizations speaking on behalf of working people are almost nonexistent on such programs. Public television in general is skewed toward professional sources, usually leaving the public out of the picture (Croteau, Hoynes, and Carragee 1996).

Finally, there is often a racial dimension to class images. The term *working class* often conjures up images of whites, even though people of color are disproportionately *working class*. Barbara Ehrenreich (1995) notes, "The most intractable stereotype is of the working class (which is, in imagination, only White) as a collection of reactionaries and bigots—reflected, for example, in the use of the terms 'hard hat' or 'redneck' as class slurs" (p. 41). She also observes, "It is possible for a middle-class person today to read the papers, watch television, even go to college, without suspecting that America has any inhabitants other than white-collar people—and, of course, the annoyingly persistent 'black underclass'" (p. 40).

That last phrase is important. In the media, the "poor" tend to be equated with blacks—even though only about 27 percent of people living below the poverty line in the United States are black; about two thirds of poor people are white; and over 40 percent are white non-Hispanic. One study of the major newsmagazines and the three major networks (Gilens 1996) examined images used to accompany stories about poverty. It found that, although blacks made up less than 30 percent of the poor in real life at the time, 62 percent of poor people pictured in newsmagazines and 65 percent of those on television were black. Such gross misrepresentation of class and race can easily contribute to misperceptions on the

part of the public. Indeed, polls have shown that Americans—of all races—tend to vastly overestimate the percentage of poor people who are black.

Sociologist Diana Kendall (2005) reminds us that class stereotypes in news and entertainment media can play a vital role in our collective understanding of inequality. Media images and narratives that represent the poor as the "other"—as genuinely different from mainstream citizens—and those that "play on the idea that the clothing, manners, and speech patterns of the working class are not as good as those of the middle or upper classes" (p. 234) help to sustain a view that the middle and upper classes are superior and deserving of their wealth and privilege. At the same time, such representations reveal little about the increasing inequality in American society and do little to illuminate the complexity of the contemporary stratification system.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION: OUT OF THE CLOSET AND INTO THE MEDIA

The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community is another group in society that historically has been underrepresented and distorted in media coverage. For decades, lesbians and gays have been either ignored or ridiculed in nearly all media accounts. Like the movements for racial equality, women's rights, and organized labor, the LGBT movement has both developed alternative media and worked for more positive portrayals in the mainstream media. It has also had a dramatic impact on U.S. society, changing social norms and laws, and thereby serving as a catalyst for changing media content. (See Figure 6.3 for highlights.)

Reviewing the literature on the topic, Fejes and Petrich (1993) argue that, until the early 1930s, film portrayals of homosexuals were used either as "comic devices," as "a form of erotic titillation," or "to depict deviance, perversion and decadence" (p. 397). From the mid-1930s to the early 1960s, more conservative norms reigned in Hollywood, and producers severely restricted and censored images of gays and lesbians. When they reemerged in the 1960s, lesbian and gay images were usually quite negative in tone. Fejes and Petrich note that, during this period, "homosexuality was portrayed at best as unhappiness, sickness, or marginality and at worst perversion and an evil to be destroyed" (p. 398). They cite one review of all the films made between 1961 and 1976 that featured a major homosexual character. Thirty-two such films appeared in this period. Eighteen of these films featured a homosexual character who ends up being killed by another character, 13 featured a homosexual character who commits suicide, and the one remaining film featured a gay man who lives—but only after being castrated. The portrayal of gays and lesbians in mainstream films has improved since then—there was no place to go but up. Over time, the number of realistic and positive portrayals slowly increased. For example, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), about two modern cowboys struggling with their sexuality, and *Milk* (2008), the bio-pic of Harvey Milk starring Sean Penn as the first gay man to be elected to public office in California, were two mainstream films that dealt sensitively with issues of homosexuality. Transgender portraits have appeared as well, with 1999's *Boys Don't Cry* and 2005's *Transamerica* marking major Hollywood successes. While Hollywood was catching up, independent films by lesbians and gays long provided a broader range of images of the LGBT community.