CHAPTER 10

The Study of Gender in Culture

Feminist Studies/Cultural Studies

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we seek to outline the general ways in which feminist work on gender and cultural studies have influenced each other, and how they might be brought together fruitfully within a sociological framework. These areas—gender studies, feminist studies, and cultural studies—are often contested and multiplicitous, and each is both disparaged and championed, both within and outside of academia. It would be impossible to represent fully the range of ideas about the overlap between these amorphous and broad categories, or to summarize adequately the extent of theoretical or empirical work done in any one of them. Our goal is to familiarize readers with some of the primary debates within cultural studies, in order to explain how the feminist study of gender has shaped, and in turn been shaped by them.

While critical of some of its excesses, we feel that cultural studies scholarship has a significant contribution to make to the study of gender within all branches of feminist studies, especially sociology. Feminists have always been contributors to cultural studies, although like most mainstream disciplines and leftist academic trends, cultural studies began with a typically masculinist bent. We need to make some artificial distinctions in order to distinguish some of the dominant trends of cultural studies to which feminists within that area have had to respond.

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What do feminist studies and cultural studies have in common? Within mainstream academia, especially sociology, both are considered trendy fringe areas, lacking methodological rigor. For those sociologists for whom sociology is or ought to be a science, these fields are dismissed for their subjectivity and overt politicization. Even more than feminism, cultural studies is seen as suspect, perhaps because of its presumed link with postmodern theory, which denies positivism and argues for a decentered relativism that many mainstream sociologists reject.

Indeed, the association of cultural studies with postmodern theory creates a clash between some feminist theorists and cultural studies scholars, because some feminist theorists decry postmodernism for its presumed denial of lived experience and the influence of broad societal structures (e.g., Bordo, 1990; Hartsock, 1990, 1996). Yet, feminist studies and cultural studies have much more in common than not, and each could benefit from knowledge of the other. Within both fields, the relationship with postmodernism and poststructuralism is deeply contested. Both are concerned with the negotiation of power, with agency and systems of social control. Both share a theoretical grounding that is at least vaguely Marxist; scholars in both fields tend to agree that various forms of social inequality should be researched, and that such research can lead to political change. It is this politicization that makes cultural studies so attractive for feminism.

2. DEFINING CULTURAL STUDIES

Cultural studies expands the notion of a proper area of cultural research and redefines the criteria for cultural evaluation. As Douglas Kellner writes:

> Cultural studies insists that culture must be studied within the social relations and systems through which culture is produced and consumed and that the study of culture is therefore intimately bound up with the study of society, politics and economies. . . . It also subverts distinctions between "high" and "low" culture by considering a wide continuum of cultural artifacts . . . and by refusing to erect any specific cultural hierarchies or canons [it] allows us to examine and critically scrutinize the whole range of culture without prior prejudices toward one or another sort of cultural text, institution or practice. It also opens the way toward more differentiated political, rather than aesthetic, valuations . . . in which one attempts to distinguish critical and oppositional from conformist and conservative moments in a cultural artifact. (1995, pp. 6–7)

Traditional aesthetic and sociological studies of culture have not always been fully adequate for the political project of feminism. Traditional aesthetic studies often fail to analyze cultural products within their social contexts, and they also often fail to recognize that aesthetic evaluations are always necessarily political. Traditional sociological studies of culture, on the other hand, tend to emphasize social context over content, by looking at culture only in structural or organizational terms. Cultural studies can provide the feminist study of gender with a framework for analyzing in detail the content of cultural production, while leaving it anchored to the social system from which it originates.

It is difficult to define cultural studies in absolute terms, because the determination of whether a work belongs within the field often depends upon whether someone says it does. Scholars conduct interdisciplinary work on "culture" under a variety of academic rubrics—Women's Studies, Media Studies, Ethnic Studies—yet there seems to be a lack of consensus about when this work constitutes "cultural studies." Lawrence Grossberg notes that publishers' financial considerations are sometimes the motivation for virtually any work that could be considered cultural studies being represented as such (1996b, p.

135). As is also the case with other relatively new fields, such as queer studies, cultural studies seems to represent a publishing phenomenon far more than an institutional development, as most scholars produce cultural studies work from within traditional disciplines (p. 135). Is cultural studies therefore simply whatever one says it is? Todd Gitlin (1997) adopts this very position:

> The interminable examination of what exactly constitutes cultural studies—or its subject, 'culture'—is itself part of the problem I seek to diagnose. Rather, I hope to slip (if not cut) the Gordian knot with the simple statement that cultural studies is the activity practiced by people who say they are doing cultural studies. (p. 25)

As Gitlin suggests, articulating a solid definition leads one into murky waters—just as feminist scholars do not share a unanimous view of what constitutes feminism.

Another method of defining cultural studies (in contrast with Gitlin's voluntaristic strategy) is an historical approach, in which only the scholarship that derives from the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (founded in the early 1960s in Birmingham, England) is considered bona fide "cultural studies." This sort of scholarship tends to focus on working-class subcultures, popular culture, and the media, from a variously defined Marxist framework. From our perspective, the voluntaristic membership approach is too ambiguous and the Birmingham-derivative criterion too rigid. We define cultural studies as work that shares the following characteristics: interdisciplinarity, particularity, textuality, and antipositivism.

2.1. Interdisciplinarity

Many academic "studies" programs (such as women's studies) are multidisciplinary, in the sense that scholars from different disciplines contribute to the field, yet often, at the level of individual projects, the work resides within only one discipline (Gordon, 1995, p. 364). Most cultural studies scholarship, by contrast, draws on the methods and insights of several disciplines simultaneously. The work begins with a social problem, and the method emanates from its particulars. At times the analysis might even be called adisciplinary, following a self-generated method that corresponds to no specific disciplinary vocabulary or debate. Indeed, many critique cultural studies scholars for their pastiche of methods, or their presumed ignorance of disciplinary accomplishments (Ferguson & Golding, 1997).

We believe that much can be gained from cultural studies' lack of proper disciplinarity. The freedom to operate outside disciplines may allow critics to study culture more creatively, by focusing on a subject as it presents itself socially, rather than separating out those aspects of the problem that correspond to disciplinary demands. As with feminist scholarship, we feel that the best cultural studies work is rigorously self-reflexive about the appropriateness of its method and resulting analysis.

2.2. Particularity

Most cultural studies scholarship is highly particular in its focus as well as its claims. Unlike other social analysts who attempt to uncover broad structural connections, cultural studies scholars often take as their subject the rich details and minute patterns of a social context, in "a microsociology of everyday life" (Inglis, 1993, p. 84). As a legacy of its origins in Marxist historical materialism, cultural studies is founded upon conjunctural

analysis, an approach that is "embedded, descriptive, and historically and contextually specific" (Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992, p. 8).

2.3. Textuality

A closely related characteristic is the attention in cultural studies to texts. Reflecting the enormous influence in the past few decades of structuralism throughout the humanities, the dissemination of semiotics and discourse theory led to the expansion of the term "text" to include a wide variety of literary and visual representations. A textual analysis shifts the question from "What?" to "How?" through an examination of the grammar of a given representation. A central tenet of cultural studies, like many other fields that have been influenced by postmodernism and poststructuralism, is that subjects cannot be studied without considering the meaning-making (signification) process through which they are constituted and interpreted.

Cultural studies takes this tenet one step further, however, by expanding the notion of the means by which a grammar or language can be represented, including even behaviors and events as kinds of texts that can be read for their social (grammatical) meaning. Parallel to the movements within anthropology and sociology that utilize ethnographic methods of "thick description" to capture particular instances of "local knowledge" or ethnomethodological quests for "common-sense knowledge" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Garfinkel, 1967; Geertz, 1973; West & Zimmerman, 1987), cultural studies scholars analyze texts as social artifacts and social events as texts. Perhaps owing to the openness of the term "culture"—which can mean ideas, practices, or products—cultural studies scholars examine a wide range of seemingly disparate texts, such as the logic of a football game, the self-fashioning of young Madonna fans, or the semiotics of suntan lotion advertising (Bourdieu, 1993; Lewis, 1990; Williamson, 1986b).

2.4. Antipositivism

Cultural studies is largely based on a hermeneutic rather than a positivist mode of analysis. Rather than claiming to reveal the universal meaning of interactions, cultural studies scholars interpret the processes through which people create culture, and culture creates meaning, and hence, identity. In this way, cultural studies can be seen as rooted in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Goffman 1959, 1961, 1971; Mead, 1934). Because the work tends to focus more frequently on the content of a cultural discourse than on the political economy and effects of its circulation, cultural studies scholarship is not always immediately and directly useful to those looking for cause and effect analyses, or for a means of changing society.

3. THE MISOGYNY OF REPRESENTATION

From its beginning as an academic practice in the 1960s, cultural studies has proven itself highly amenable to the feminist study of gender, owing to its leftist orientation and focus on culture as a significant arena of ideological struggle. One of the earliest projects

of second wave feminism of the 1970s was the analysis of the myriad ways in which patriarchy is embedded in ordinary culture. As Meaghan Morris describes it, feminism is "a movement of discontent with 'the everyday'" (1988c, p. 197). This engagement with the politics of daily life is exemplified by the classic feminist slogan, "The personal is political." The expression suggests not only that women's individual problems are often symptoms of broader social inequality, but also that the most mundane and normalized aspects of personal/cultural life perpetuate this inequality.

Both activist and academic feminists analyzed the breadth and depth of gender inequality throughout culture, in the tyranny of "common-sense" ideas about gender and in the representation of those ideas. Across a wide array of cultural genres, feminists began the initial task of naming their oppression by highlighting the ways in which everyday culture worked against women's best interests. This early work emphasizes uncovering the misogyny within representation. While some of the first studies focus on literature and art (Millett, 1970; Nochlin, 1971), much of it analyzes the mass media.

Many feminists believe that one of the primary causes of gender-based inequality is the misrepresentation of women in media images. In the early 1970s, radical feminists staged protests against the direct sources of that imagery, from *Ladies Home Journal* to the Miss America pageant (Echols, 1989, pp. 92–96, 195–197). One of the earliest radical feminist anthologies, *Sisterhood is Powerful* (Morgan, 1970), contained attacks on a variety of media, from news broadcasts to deodorant commercials. The activism and advocacy of liberal feminists reflect a similar concern with media images, as exemplified by Betty Friedan's discussion of women's magazines in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

Radical and liberal feminists shared a set of assumptions about the media that shaped the direction of their analyses. In most cases, feminist critics presumed that the media not only reflect social values but also play a major role in their dissemination. Based on traditional sociological media studies that use the "hypodermic," or two-step flow models of media effects (Adorno, 1991; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), most of the early studies take for granted the notion that the media have a one-directional influence on viewers. These feminist critics also assumed that the media could and should reflect reality, rather than reify harmful stereotypes. This emphasis on stereotypes is central to the dominant, "images of women" approach. Drawing on the content analysis research of the Cultural Indicators Project of the Annenberg School, feminists counted and catalogued media images. Feminist cultural critics concluded that women were both negatively represented (often this meant sexually, or in traditional, nonprofessional roles such as housewives) and substantially underrepresented. Gaye Tuchman went so far as to name this lack of representation "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women" (1978).

Feminist critics believed that improved and increased media representation of women would lead to social change (Walters, 1995, p. 36). The images-of-women approach developed according to the disciplinary demands of traditional communications research, but it met the needs of the developing political movement as well. By documenting the sexism in media images, feminists could do their own consciousness-raising, raise the larger culture's awareness of inequality, and pressure the media to change (Walters, p. 37). This was an important step, because the idea that sexism was rampant in popular culture—and even that sexism was wrong—was still a position that had to be argued. However, despite the early consensus that cultural studies were legitimate and vital projects for feminism, disagreements quickly surfaced about the proper direction for analysis to take.

4. POSTSTRUCTURAL FEMINIST ANALYSES

It was not long after the images-of-women research began to be disseminated that criticisms of this approach surfaced. Film studies was already well into the process of transforming itself from an aesthetic discipline concerned with issues of form and auteurism to a highly politicized bastion of psychoanalysis and semiotics. For many feminist film scholars, cataloging images of women proved an unsatisfactory strategy for examining misogyny, because it failed to examine the very deep structures embedded in the process of visual signification. By focusing simply on the basic outline of an image (whether or not it is female, whether or not the female is nontraditional, etc.), scholars using the images-of-women approach seemed to be missing the deeper significance of how images operate.

Critics of the images-of-women approach wanted to move away from the question of how well women were represented because they felt that what constitutes a "positive" or "negative" image was never self evident, and that images could never transparently reflect reality. Instead of assuming they knew the reality of what women were and could judge the accuracy of their representation, these feminists began to evaluate the construction and circulation of "Woman" through the processes of signification. Drawing on the poststructuralist methods of what came to be known as "Screen Theory" (because of its association with the film journal *Screen*), critics of the images-of-women approach suggested a theoretical concept to explain the status of women's representation under patriarchy: the male gaze. The feminist version of Screen Theory was expressed most succinctly and famously in Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). This article provides a poststructuralist reading of the psychological processes that take place in "the classic realist text," in this case the mainstream Hollywood drama. Mulvey presented the provocative thesis that all film viewing is male, in the sense that the classic realist film text evokes a psychological response in viewers that is structured around a patriarchal male psyche.

To understand how Mulvey came to this conclusion, one must trace the development of feminist film theory from structuralism and psychoanalysis. Following the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1966), structuralism analyzes culture by determining the grammar of a given text. Structuralism asserts that, "Rather than reflecting an already existing reality, the function of language is to organise and construct our access to reality" (Storey, 1993, p. 55). Therefore, a structuralist study of culture would be inextricable from a study of its grammar, both linguistic and logical. Structuralism posits grammar as engaging in a series of binary oppositions, such as nature/culture, male/female, etc., out of which meaning is constructed. According to the structuralist view, meaning is always relational and contextual, and yet structuralist readings tend to be very absolute, presuming that there is one, fixed meaning of a text which can be perfectly outlined by the critic (Seiter, 1992, p. 63).

Poststructuralism, on the other hand, focuses not on the certainty and fixity of meaning but on its fluidity, ruptures, and excesses. In combining structuralism and psychoanalysis, the work of Jacques Lacan (1977a, 1977b) has been particularly important for film studies. Lacan reinterprets Freud's stages of psychological development in linguistic terms, explaining how identity formation itself is a product and process of language. For example, Lacan links the Oedipal phase of psychological development (in which the child learns to differentiate itself from the mother) to the acquisition of language (I am me, not you). In the pre-Oedipal phase, the child has no clear sense of where her own

boundaries end and her mother's begin. The loss of that close bond with the original source of pleasure represents a profound lack, which is also reflected in the assumption of language (since saying one thing always involves repressing some aspect of its opposite). From this perspective, identity is a necessary fiction, a narrative position that is continually asserted to establish an ever-fragile, fictive whole. Yet the lack (the loss of the mother, the subconscious elided in the assertion of ego, the inability of language to translate a reality) is always present.

According to Lacan, the cores of our identities are not individual, private essences but social, linguistic structures. Just as structuralists described the construction of culture according to linguistic logic, poststructuralists describe the construction of self according to that same cultural logic. Because they believe that the very contours of our psyches are embedded within language, which is embedded within culture, poststructuralist critics trace the connections between psychological, textual, and cultural structures. It is within this theoretical framework that Mulvey could claim that "the gaze is male." Mulvey believes that the cinema is structured around men's psychological needs (owing to the male domination of the film industry), in a way that is harmful to women. Building on the Lacanian idea that cultural formations reflect and answer psychological formations, Mulvey states that all viewing positions have been masculinized, so that anyone viewing a film becomes caught up in "the male gaze." This masculinization occurs through film's invocation of two distinct types of visual pleasure: scopophilia and fetishism.

Scopophilia, or voyeurism, is enhanced by the nature of the viewing experience. The brightness of the screen and the darkness of the theater position the spectator as if he is spying on the characters. In this analysis, the ability to look is associated with cultural power, and the fact that the film's characters do not know they are being watched (since they almost never address the camera directly) enhances the spectatorial sense of power. Films also offer the pleasure of fetishism, the spectator's enchantment with the focus on women's bodies. Women's bodies serve in the film as sexual objects, there to receive the gaze of the camera, the male characters, and the spectator.

Mulvey sees these pleasures as distinctly related to the needs of the male psyche. The gaze of the camera addresses a male viewer, as the film is created for and from his point of view. In Western culture, according to Mulvey and sociologist John Berger (1972), the act of looking conveys and consolidates male power. Men are defined as men by their ability to look at women, and women, in turn, are defined as subordinates in part by their inability to look, their objectification. Since fetishization and voyeurism serve primarily as mechanisms for assuaging castration anxiety, the spectator the film constructs is presumed to be male. Whether through the voyeurism of film noir's investigation of female sexuality, or through the fetishism of the display of women's bodies as spectacle, in the psychology of film Woman can only represent lack.

Men, of course, also experience this lack (the inadequacies of language and loss of the mother mentioned earlier), but they project it onto women, who come to represent both the loss of the phallus (castration) as well as the phallus itself (fetishization). All that film offers to women, according to Mulvey, is the masochism of accepting the male gaze (by identifying with the female characters). The men in the film, the men behind the camera, and the men in the audience embody looking, and demonstrate the male gaze, while the women in the film, and in the audience, simply embody "to-be-looked-at-ness" (p. 19).

This understanding of the gendered nature of film pleasure has been highly useful for feminists. Mulvey's use of psychoanalysis helps explain not only why cinema is so

compelling, but more importantly, why men objectify women (Smelik, 1995, p. 69). Rather than viewing women as a natural group that is inaccurately represented in film, poststructuralist feminists see women as a group that is constituted and defined by representation. Poststructuralist feminists conceive of womanhood not as biological difference from men but as a psychological effect of male domination. Drawing on the psychoanalytic analysis found in Teresa de Lauretis's *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984), Ann Smelik explains why signification is so important for an understanding of women's subordination:

> Telling stories is one of the ways of reproducing subjectivity in any given culture. Each story derives its structure from the subject's desire ("the hero"). Narrative structures are defined by an Oedipal desire: the desire to know origin and end. Sexual desire is intimately bound up with the desire for knowledge, that is, the quest for truth. The desire to solve riddles is a male desire *par excellence,* because the female subject is herself the riddle. "Woman" is the question ("what does woman want?") and can hence not ask the question nor make her desire intelligible (1995, pp. 73–74).

The problem for women is not just that men objectify women and that this objectification is then represented in cultural texts, but also that the psychological imperatives that initially give rise to these texts are solidified and then replicated by them. Our deepest subconscious desires become structured in patriarchal ways, so that what we want and who we understand ourselves to be, as men and women, are shaped in ways that are extremely harmful to women.

Psychoanalytic, poststructuralist criticism dominated feminist film studies of the 1970s and much of the 1980s. It provided a vocabulary feminists could use to explore the psychological structures through which cultural texts and misogyny operate, and it paid more attention to the detail of texts than the images-of-women approach. From the beginning of feminist media studies, feminists were deeply divided over not just how they would study images of women, but also what "images" and "women" were, and what the purpose of feminist cultural criticism should be. Caught between positivist social science and structuralism, Screen theory and the images-of-women approach were irreconcilable strategies for the study of gender, and the debates across the divide were strenuous.

5. THE BIRMINGHAM SCHOOL

Within cultural studies, divisive debates surrounding gender and structuralism[1] were taking place as well. As feminists became involved in cultural studies, they brought with them a strong commitment to study women's experiences. For example, in the early 1970s feminists affiliated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), such as Angela McRobbie, Charlotte Brunsdon, Rosalind Coward, and Dorothy Hobson, insisted that the Center scholars make gender an integral part of their analyses (see Brunsdon, 1996). This push was so emphatic and transformative that Hall labels it an "interruption" in which feminists literally "broke into cultural studies" (1992, pp. 282–283). This desire to document the previously ignored or devalued realm of women's cultural experience, as well as the perceived excesses of the Mulvian "male gaze," had

[1] Owing to space limitations, we have omitted discussion of the shift within British cultural studies of the 1970s from culturalism to poststructuralism. Just as within feminist film studies there was a move from studying women as a social group to studying the representation of women, within cultural studies there was a shift from studying subcultures as communities to studying semiotic practices within subcultures. For information on this topic, see Hall (1980a), Grossberg, (1996a), and Sparks (1996).

important consequences for feminist cultural studies scholars. A new branch of feminist cultural studies formed, in rebellion against the idea that women are not actively involved in cultural reception.

Until this point, the field had been dominated by studies of male subcultures. The exclusion of women was due, in part, to a certain ambivalence toward femininity that has surfaced repeatedly throughout the history of cultural studies, as popular culture itself has been envisioned as "feminine" (Joyrich, 1996, p. 30; Modleski, 1986). The dearth of studies on girls and women could also be explained by the Marxist legacy of cultural studies. Scholars made class central (to the exclusion of other variables such as race, gender, and sexual identity), and focused on "public modes of resistance," which typically involve male actors (Joyrich, 1996, p. 13). Women and girls have long been seen by social science researchers as inheriting class from men (fathers or husbands). For the most part, men doing Marxist cultural studies view men as purely classed and ungendered, and women as indirectly classed and tainted by gender. In addition to ignoring women's subculture, McRobbie notes that male scholars often interpret the subcultures they did study in ways that were troublesome. Lacking any kind of analysis of gender inequality, and overidentifying with their subjects, they often valorize rather than critique the oppressive aspects of masculinity (such as alcohol abuse and violence) (1981, p. 114). In a criticism of the work of Dick Hebdige and Paul Willis, McRobbie offers the reminder that male subcultures which oppress women cannot accurately be called resistant of the values of the dominant culture.

6. AUDIENCE STUDIES

In the 1980s, feminist audience studies developed within and parallel to a growing trend among cultural studies scholars to examine the reception of culture. Cultural studies as a whole moved away from the strict interpretations of meaning required by structuralism toward a more fluid understanding of the impact of ideology on culture. Two crucial concepts underpinning this theoretical shift are Antonio Gramsci's "hegemony" and Ernesto Laclau's "articulation." Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony explains why the masses (workers) do not rise up and challenge their economic exploitation. This approach states that elite classes rule not by imposing ideology on the masses, but by wooing them. As the working classes come to accept cultural messages which are framed according to the interests of their oppressors, they are less likely to rebel. The theory of hegemony also entails moving away from the Marxist notion of base/superstructure, as not all aspects of a culture perfectly reflect the needs of the economic structure from which they emanate. Some ideas oppose structure, and some ideas don't do anything, at least not in the service of capitalism. Culture is fluid, contradictory, and a site for struggle.

Laclau (1977) develops the concept of articulation, initially presented by Gramsci and Althusser, to explain both how cultural and economic formations are relatively autonomous, and how elites use culture to maintain their hegemony. Laclau's concept of articulation depicts ideology not as a misrepresentation of reality, but rather as a link between people's experience of reality and their interpretation of it. The ruling classes win hegemony not by imposing a single worldview, but by articulating a relationship between socioeconomic conditions and ruling-class philosophy. In essence, elites define what the "problem" of society currently is, in a way that smoothes over contradictions and appeals to working class "common sense" (Slack, 1996, p. 121). This theory relates

cultural values to political–economic structures, but not in a predetermined way. Ideology and experience are constantly in contradiction—both internally and with each other. They must be continually rearticulated for the ruling classes to dominate (Hall, 1996, p. 43–44).

Cultural studies scholars draw on Gramsci and Laclau to argue that cultural meaning is not a static "given" embedded in economic structures or in texts, but a process. They study how people use texts, arguing that the act of reception produces meaning. In an important early audience study, David Morley (1980) attempts to test Hall's "encoding/decoding" model of media reception on television viewers. Based on a model of articulation (Slack, 1996, p. 123–124), Hall argues that meaning resides in the production, distribution, and reception of texts (1980b). Morley's audience study was built on a previous textual analysis (Brunsdon & Morley, 1978) of the British newsmagazine program *Nationwide,* which showed how hegemonic or preferred readings were encoded in the show through its use of "the everyday" and common sense to support the dominant ideology. Morley was less successful in his own study at analyzing the decoding of the text, however. As he frankly admits, viewers' interpretations of the show did not always correspond as strongly to their class positions as he had predicted they would. In fact, he finds that viewers shifted many times between "preferred," "negotiated," and "resistant" readings, often transgressing supposed class boundaries. Morley concluded that a more detailed model of decoding was necessary to explain the viewing process, and that variables such as race and gender needed to be taken more fully into account; someone who is socially subordinate in one regard (e.g., in terms of his or her class position), and therefore somewhat more likely to express a resistant or counterhegemonic reading, may in other regards be socially dominant (by virtue of race or gender) (1992, p. 135).

While his *Nationwide* study was less conclusive than Morley had initially hoped, it nonetheless signals a fundamental shift away from structuralism into a more fluid and reader-based understanding of culture. Instead of searching for the meaning of the text, cultural studies scholars queried: What do audiences do with texts? How does reception matter in terms of culture at large? A series of related debates were taking place at the same time within feminism, focused on women viewers/cultural consumers. In response to what many perceived as the rigidity and essentialism of gaze theory, which left no conceptual space for any consideration of what a female gaze might look like, some feminists abandoned the quest to extricate or explicate the Woman trapped in the Text, to study actual women viewers/readers/interpreters of culture.

Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984) is perhaps the most influential feminist study of reception of the 1980s. Based on her observations of interactions among a community of romance novel readers, in addition to her analysis of the novels themselves, Radway concludes that what the women gain from the novels is fairly complex. On the one hand, the content is frequently misogynist, reaffirming conventional gender relations and encouraging women to interpret men's callousness, and even violence, as desperate cries for yet more patience and love. On the other hand, the act of reading itself functions as more than regressive escape. It ultimately serves as a protest against the gender inequities readers face in their daily lives, because they commit time and resources to nurturing themselves instead of catering only to the needs of their families. While Radway acknowledges that their reading did not lead the women to engage in active collective resistance to their oppression, it does represent a recognition, however unconscious, that they deserve more attention and respect from men. Studying their use of romance novels led Radway to quite different conclusions than she might have drawn had she only given her own readings of the texts.

Radway's ambivalent interpretation of the ultimate political meaning of romance reading for women reflected a growing tension among feminist cultural scholars (and among cultural studies scholars in general). Once they began studying audiences, they witnessed a great deal of viewing pleasure generated from the reception of politically regressive texts. How, then, should one interpret this phenomenon? What were the politics of pleasure? Reception studies reignited or reframed a feminist debate regarding pornography that had been circulating for some time, about the twin poles of pleasure and danger (Snitow, Stansell, & Thompson, 1983; Vance, 1984). As postmodernism swept over the Academy and postfeminism flooded the airwaves, feminist ethnographers began asking themselves how they should interpret the guilty pleasures of mass cultural consumption.

7. POSTMODERNISM, PLEASURE, AND RESISTANCE

Just as there were deep anxieties in political movements of the 1980s about the meaning of postfeminism and post-Marxism, in the academy postmodernism was a phenomenon that had to be responded to in some fashion. Whether it was an historical condition, an architectural style, or a media creation depended upon one's point of view; nevertheless, many academic disciplines were grappling (and still grapple) with the same questions about the usefulness or threat of postmodern theory. Within cultural studies, scholars disagree about the implications of postmodernism for their interpretations of culture, Postmodern theory exacerbates a tension that had long existed between critics who expressed varying degrees of pessimism about capitalist culture. Some scholars, such as Frederic Jameson (1984), bitterly critique postmodernism as a decadent development of late capitalism, in which most aspects of life have become hopelessly commodified. Most scholars writing about postmodernism, however, tend to be, if not celebratory, then at least markedly neutral about the subject.

The most significant aspects of a postmodern era, according to postmodern theorists, relate to the overwhelming presence of media in daily life, the breakdown of Enlightenment rationality, and the focus on particularity. Jean-François Lyotard heralds the death of the metanarrative, the end of any pretensions of universalism (1984). Baudrillard contributes the idea of the simulacra, the notion that all culture now simply recirculates existing ideas: with originality defunct, everything is simply simulation (1983). Michel Foucault incorporates his concept of power/knowledge into the term "discourse," expanding on the interrelationship between materiality and language, and proposing a more diffuse model of power than the traditional Marxist notion of bourgeois domination of the masses (1990). All of these theoretical developments fueled a growing tendency among cultural studies scholars in the 1980s to focus on the aesthetics of style over the politicized interpretation of ideology, and on the fluid nature of power and meaning. It became difficult for scholars to continue to produce macrolevel, political analyses at all, for fear of erecting their own metanarratives.

Some critics note that cultural studies does in fact have much in common with postmodernism (Chen, 1996; Hebdige, 1996). For example, Laclau's theory of articulation, and his later work with Chantal Mouffe deconstructing the stability/notion of class (1985), while originally linking materiality and textuality, paves the way for cultural critics who believe there is little if any relationship between the structure of texts and the structure of society (Slack, 1996, p. 121; Sparks, 1996, p. 89).

While some feminists speak out about what they see as the excesses of postmodern theory (Bordo, 1990; Hartsock, 1990, 1996), others welcome the new kinds of analyses that postmodernism offers (Barrett & Phillips, 1992; Butler, 1990; Flax, 1990). Feminism had already been moving in the direction of breaking down grand narratives of identity (such as the notion that women constitute a natural group whose members share similar interests) to focus on the specificity of race, class, and sexual identity.[2] For some feminists, then, postmodernism's emphasis on fragmentation and social construction allows a way to theorize this specificity without reifying differences of identity into naturalized categories.

Perhaps because Mulvey's notion of the gaze completely dismissed the possibility of women's pleasure, many among the next generation of feminist scholars responded by searching out pleasure. One of the most common textual strategies is reading against the grain, in which critics search for moments of excess and contradiction within traditional texts, such as melodramatic films and those by Hitchcock (Byars, 1991; Modleski, 1988). This approach represents quite a departure from Mulvey's assumption that only experimental feminist films that radically broke with film conventions could be nonoppressive. From this perspective, even mainstream, sexist films contain the seeds of their own undoing or deconstruction.

Just as Radway found that reading romance novels was not a masochistic activity for women, however misogynist the texts might be, other feminist ethnographers also discovered that the relationship between texts and viewers' values was complex. For example, Ien Ang (1985) has written about Dutch fans of *Dallas,* and the uses they made of this 1980s American nighttime soap opera. Ang analyzes letters viewers wrote to her in response to a newspaper ad she placed. She identifies three groups of viewers, all of whom have differing relationships to the "ideology of mass culture," the value system that dismisses shows such as *Dallas* as trash. *Dallas*-lovers, *Dallas*-haters, and ironists (those who liked mocking it) all express some form of negativity toward the show, yet all of them enjoy watching it.

Ang gives a very nuanced reading of the ways in which ideology (viewers' negativity toward popular culture) can operate independently from behavior (their viewing of it), as well as the possibility that pleasure can operate relatively independently of polities. Cora Kaplan (1986) explores the pleasure of watching a miniseries such as *The Thornbirds,* where the breaking of taboos and transgression of "reality" allows women viewers to experience temporary freedom from oppressive social norms. Viewers can enjoy texts without necessarily subscribing to their implicit values, because of the roles that irony and fantasy play in our reception and enjoyment of texts.

Dorothy Hobson's influential study of the producers and viewers of the British soap opera, *Crossroads* (1982), deals with another aspect of women's viewing pleasure for which they are often disparaged—their supposed confusion of soap opera characters with real people. Rather than reflecting an inability to distinguish reality from fantasy, she argues that viewers' interest in the characters reflects an intentional suspension of reality in order to engage with the text on the level of fantasy. The identification with the soap opera fantasy is not an all-or-nothing process, where one either believes (correctly) that the stories are fabrications, or believes (quite naively) that they are real. The viewers are well aware that they are not watching a documentary, yet soap operas can still engage

[2] Some feminist scholars have argued that feminist studies are postmodern studies, and that postmoderism has appropriated much feminist work without acknowledging this debt (Morris, 1988b; Skeggs, 1995, p. 193).

their interest and even their emotions. The emotions they express are not in response to the made-up situations in the characters' lives, but to situations in the viewers' own lives that soap operas evoke.

This insight is an important corrective, not only to the idea that soap opera viewers (or female viewers in general) lack intelligence and judgment, but also to the idea that audiences passively receive the "message" of a text. In talking with viewers of *Personal Best* and *The Color Purple,* Elizabeth Ellsworth (1986) and Jacqueline Bobo (1988), respectively, observe that viewers actively and idealistically revise the films to create for themselves pleasurable viewing.

Both authors draw a connection between this revision and the viewers' marginal status in mainstream U.S. culture as African-American and lesbian women. Viewers ignore those aspects of the film which they feel are racist and homophobic, and in the case of the *Personal Best* viewers, even rewrite (that is, read against the grain) the plots to create a more satisfying ending. Marginalized both as members of society and as film viewers (since they rarely see gratifying representations of themselves in film), they create for themselves the kinds of films they want to see. Recent scholarship on fan clubs explores the extent to which viewers take an active role in cultural consumption, forming fan communities as well as creating their own texts (Lewis, 1990; Penley, 1992).

Many feminist cultural studies scholars are relieved to have more theoretical space in which to consider the effects of cultural texts, instead of having the answer preordained by theoretical or political commitments. Some of the same feminists who focus on the pleasures of reception are also some of the strongest critics of work that is perceived as too uncritical or too optimistic about the joys of viewing (Joyrich, 1996; Modleski, 1991; Morris, 1988a; Williamson, 1986a). While still divided about the extent to which viewers can resist ideology, or the extent to which our pleasure is implicated by our politics, most feminist cultural critics nevertheless know that there is always, for women, some danger mixed with the pleasure. In the late 1980s a whole host of reception-oriented studies emerged, focusing on historical and cultural context, and "women's genres," such as soap operas, melodramas, and self-help books (Brown, 1990; Byars, 1991; Gamman & Marshment, 1988; Gledhill, 1987; Press, 1991; Pribram, 1988; Simonds, 1992, 1996; Spigel, 1992; Spigel, & Mann, 1992; Stacey, 1994).

8. CULTURAL STUDIES, FEMINIST STUDIES, AND SOCIOLOGY

One of the main contributions feminism has made to the study of culture has been the understanding that *everything* is gendered; gender is not merely one layer of meaning, but is central to the construction and organization of all meaning. Rather than simply adding women to studies of culture, feminists consider the ways in which culture is fundamentally gendered.

Empirical cultural studies have much in common, methodologically, with feminist studies. Traditional sociological method presumes a distanced observer, and casts research participants ("subjects") as untrustworthy obstacles in the quest for truth. Feminist scholars ask: Can we forge nonexploitive relationships with those we study? What do we do with the interpretations of their own lives that people offer us? How might we craft the research process to preserve the integrity of what people tell us? What do we do about the Marxist notion of false consciousness, which resonates (ironically) with the conventional sociological researcher's view of subjects? (See Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1996;

Fonow & Cook, 1991; Gorelick, 1996; Harding & Hintikka, 1983; Krieger, 1991; Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992; Roberts, 1981; Smith, 1996; Stacey, 1988). Many feminist scholars draw on notions of grounded theory and the social construction of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Glaser & Strauss, 1973) to justify flexible research agendas and personalized relationships with those we research. Feminist scholars, like cultural studies scholars, are concerned with negotiating the nuanced interstices of complicity and resistance. Similarly, feminist scholars ruminate upon ways to link theory and practice, and to make accounts of both less exclusionary to nonacademics (see, e.g., essays in Gottfried, 1996). These quests are quintessentially sociological.

Cultural studies are, in fact, enmeshed in sociology, a polyglot descendant of Marxism, Weberian theory, the Frankfurt school, symbolic interaction, ethnomethodology, communications research, and critical media studies. From conceptualizations of art as cultural production (Becker, 1982; Griswold, 1986; Wolff, 1981) to examinations of the social construction of identity (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959, 1961; Grodin & Lindlof, 1996), from macro-level theory about base and superstructure (Williams, 1958) to micro-level deconstruction of individual and group behavior (Garfinkel, 1967) to conversation analysis (Fisher, 1993; Mishler, 1986; Moerman, 1988; Riessman, 1990)—cultural studies may be seen as having sociological roots that run deep.

Cultural studies, like feminist gender studies, may also be seen as contesting mainstream or positivistic sociology, from rational choice theory (which posits that individuals utilize cost–benefit analyses in all decision-making) to uses and gratifications research (which seeks to articulate media effects on users). Sonia Livingstone suggests that the quantitative/qualitative split within sociological media studies may be overcome now that cultural studies scholars (or critical media studies) have refocused on reception, and now that positivists—former uses-and-gratifications proponents—have begun to reconsider cause–effect claims (1990). Drawing on Katz (1980), she describes media studies as having always "oscillat[ed] between conceptions of powerful media and powerful viewers" (p. 8). However, the way the media operate cannot be reduced to this simple dichotomy. Agency and social control, political economy, and textual detail all are important, and all must be taken into account. Wendy Griswold's concept of the cultural diamond provides a clear model for thinking about culture. At its corners are the four elements necessary for a complete understanding of culture: social world, creator, receiver, and cultural object, with each corner connected to each of the others (1987, p. 1994).

In our view, the most useful cultural studies scholarship socially grounds cultural phenomena, and draws on a variety of critical approaches, from historiography to psychoanalysis to ethnography, integrating many variables—from race, class, and gender to nationality, age, and sexual identity. While the rigor, interdisciplinarity, and high quality of much feminist cultural studies work is inspiring, it raises the question of how well we mere mortals can juggle so many scholarly demands. While this kind of grounded work is difficult to do, however, it is vital, in order for our analyses to be productive interrogations of the politics of daily life, rather than merely entertaining readings of "resistance."

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