CULTURAL THEORY AND POPULAR CULTURE

A READER

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19

FEMINIST APPROACHES TO POPULAR CULTURE: GIVING PATRIARCHY ITS DUE

Lana F. Rakow

What are commonly referred to in communication as the 'popular culture debates' are troubling from a feminist perspective for two reasons: first, the canon of debaters includes no women; second, the debates' analyses of social power do not focus on patriarchal society, thus excluding feminist theoretical analysis. Yet feminist approaches to popular culture do constitute a serious social analysis and an important theoretical agenda. The four approaches described here – the images and representations approach, the recovery and reappraisal approach, the reception and experience approach, and the cultural theory approach argue that popular culture plays a role in patriarchal society and that theoretical analysis of this role warrants a major position in the ongoing debates.

Introduction

Following a long history of literature arising out of the humanities and social sciences taking positions on the value and functions of British and US popular culture, a second body of literature has arisen to define, categorize, critique, and extend those positions. It is these two bodies of literature that together can be said to constitute what are so often referred to as the 'popular culture debates'. The first provided the raw material which has been selected, interpreted, and constituted by the second into a historical canon, a tradition of positions about the quality and changing nature of culture, the rise of the mass media, and the political implications of capitalist-industrialization. Over time, the two have come to overlap, as early interpreters of the debate recede into the past and are themselves accorded positions within it.

How these positions should be sorted out, into gross or fine categories, has not been uniformly agreed upon. Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel (1965), for example, have cited four approaches they see taken respectively by Providers, Traditionalists, Progressives,

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and Radicals. Providers and Progressives view popular culture with more optimism because they support the present society. Traditionalists and Radicals reject the present order, but the first do so on the basis of the values that it is replacing, the second on the basis of the values it frustrates (pp. 364–5). Tom Kando (1975) has divided the debates into two positions: 'those who feel that mass culture and popular culture are bad culture, and those who do not' (p. 438). He divides those positions into subcategories: elitist, conservative, radical, and marxist arguments against popular culture; liberal and radical arguments in favor of popular culture. C.W.E. Bigsby (1976) has described the debates as consisting of two major divisions reflecting two extreme ideologies, expressing in their positions on popular culture epiphantic and apocalyptic fears and hopes about the direction of society. Patrick Brantlinger (1983) has classified those on the left and the right who argue against popular culture as sharing a mythology of 'negative classicism', a mythology defended by Marshall McLuhan and his disciples and by cultural pluralists.

While the categorizations of these writers vary, their summaries share assumptions that underlie most analyses of the 'popular culture debates'. First, they assume a canon of debaters: Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, the Frankfurt School (Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse), Leo Lowenthal, Daniel Bell, Herbert Gans, Dwight Macdonald, Edward Shils, Richard Hoggart, and Raymond Williams, to identify a few. Second, they share, explicitly or implicitly, Bigsby's insight that 'the politics of popular culture . . . conceal a more basic concern with the nature of the individual and his [sic] society' (Bigsby, 1976, p. 5). They assume, at most, three possible social structures, over which the struggle is then conducted: mass society, class society, and pluralist society. That is, the categories of social power are defined along lines given in advance.

The popular culture debates as currently constituted are troubling from a feminist perspective for two reasons, suggested by these underlying assumptions. First, the canon of debaters contains no women. Though Hannah Arendt and Q.D. Leavis are occasionally accorded the status of minor figures, Arendt has usually been overshadowed by members of the Frankfurt School and Leavis has usually been overshadowed by her husband, F.R. Leavis. Regardless of their status, however, neither offered positions substantially different from the male figures in the canon. Second, the competing analysis of social power (which the debates are presumed to be about) do not include patriarchal society, excluding a feminist analysis of popular culture at the level of theory rather than artifact.[1] By assuming that a stratified society can sufficiently be described in terms of relations between elite and mass, ruling class and working class, dominant culture and subcultures, they obscure other social categories, such as that of men and women.

The first problem, the exclusion of women from theoretical discourse, is typical of received academic histories. Susan Sniader Lanser and Evelyn Torton Beck (1979) have pointed this out as it relates to the tradition of literary criticism:

> It is useful to remind ourselves that in a patriarchal society, the idea of woman as thinker or theoretician is seen virtually as a contradiction in terms. While the term *woman writer* is

> clear evidence of the society's basic conception of the artist as male, our comfort with the phrase does suggest some recognition of women as creators . . . [P]atriarchal culture has grudgingly learned to tolerate the woman artist, yet it continues to resist, denigrate, and mistrust woman as critic, theory-builder, or judge . . . the term *woman critic* sounds like an awkward, faulty construction, not corresponding to any veritable reality. (Lanser and Beck, 1979, p. 79)

Lanser and Beck's comments suggest that before we assume that no women have historically made significant theoretical contributions that bear on the subject of popular culture, we should look to see who else has been excluded from the canon of debaters. We need not look far. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1911 book, *The Man-Made World or Our Androcentric Culture*, is a feminist analysis of culture that stands apart from the positions usually included within the popular culture debates. Gilman argued that men have monopolized, managed, and masculinized human activities, excluding women from many spheres of creativity and from many forms of amusement and leisure activities. Fiction, she said, 'has not given any true picture of woman's life, very little of human life, and a disproportionate section of man's life' (p. 102). Games and sports 'are essentially masculine, and as such [are] alien to women' (p. 109). Rather than critiquing a mass, class, or pluralist society, she critiqued a patriarchal one, or as she called it, an androcentric one, where two sets of cultural activities exist, one for men and one for women, both dictated by men.

Beatrice Forbes-Robertson Hale, in her 1914 book *What Women Want: An interpretation of the feminist movement*, posed a similar critique of men's control over culture:

> Women have often been taunted with lack of the creative and reasoning faculties. But until the present age the number of women possessing opportunities to develop these has been so small in proportion to men as to make any comparison invidious. Only now are the faculties of women emerging from obscurity. Through all time women as a class have been silent; now a proportion becomes articulate. During the years of their silence Man the Romancer has spoken for them, clothing them with the garments of his own Fantasy. So well has his fancy wrought that sometimes women have even believed it fact, though more often their acquiescence has been superficial. . . . He forgets, too, that his fantasy clothed but one creature – 'Woman' – a chimera of his own brain, and that what he is at last witnessing is the rise of women, individually and collectively, an infinite variety of conscious persons bound together by the single need of self-development. When as many women as men are free to express themselves, there will remain but one great struggle on earth, the struggle of all the dispossessed, men and women alike, for their inheritance. (Hale, 1914, pp. 6–7)

These passages illustrate that taking up the standpoint of women within a patriarchal society has presented feminists with a very different perspective on the question of popular culture. They raise questions about women's opportunities for creativity and how these may have changed historically, how women's creativity has been evaluated, how women have been silenced, how women have made meaning of their lives with the myths and activities accorded to them by men, and how men have made meaning of

their lives at the expense of women. While the history of feminist approaches to popular culture remains to be written, these examples from Gilman and Hale suggest that the canon that has come to constitute and set the terms of the 'popular culture debates' is in need of critique and revision. Feminism is a challenge to the very power relations that have determined the ground over which the discussion can be waged.

While the history of feminist approaches to popular culture remains to be recovered and constructed, we can look to feminist work within the past twenty years, during the resurgence of the feminist movement, to gain an understanding of contemporary feminist positions about popular culture. We need not wait for a new history to begin the process of examining and interpreting what feminists have been saying about women's relationship to popular culture and to begin according these positions the status of history within ongoing academic debates.[2]

Though contemporary feminists have taken a diversity of approaches to popular culture, they have shared two major assumptions. The first is that women have a particular relationship to popular culture that is different from men's. They have pointed out that women have played central roles as consumers of certain popular culture products, that they are a central subject matter of popular culture for both men and women, and that, in some cases and in some time periods, they have been significant creators and producers of popular culture. The second assumption is that understanding how popular culture functions both for women and for a patriarchal culture is important if women are to gain control over their own identities and change both social mythologies and social relations. Feminism, as a critique of existing social relations, assumes that change is not only desirable but necessary. What kind of change and how it will be accomplished is, however, not as readily agreed upon.

To enter into an analysis of popular culture from a feminist position is a complicated task because, to paraphrase Bigsby, it involves a basic concern with the individual and her relation to society. The scope of this task is apparent from Katherine Fishburn's annotated bibliography (1982), a reference guide to works about women's images in popular culture that encompasses far-ranging feminist research. In order to give some form and coherence to feminist work on popular culture, I will present here a selection of contemporary work grouped roughly into four approaches: the Images and Representations Approach, the Recovery and Reappraisal Approach, the Reception and Experience Approach, and the Cultural Theory Approach. The works discussed under each category share some essential elements; however, the categories do overlap and are not intended to be exclusive.

The Images and Representations Approach

Since Betty Friedan (1963) pointed out the disparity between the messages of popular culture and the experiences and growing despair of real women, feminists within and outside of academia have devoted considerable attention to the characteristics of women's images in popular culture. This approach was the entree of contemporary feminists into discussions of popular culture, and signaled a departure from the traditional

academic debates in that the critique often originated from non-academic, middle class women, the very group that was the intended audience of much popular culture.

As Fishburn points out (1982, p. 3), women's most significant relationship to popular culture has been in providing its major images, so the amount of attention devoted by feminists to images should not be surprising. The work in this area has looked for answers to several related questions: (1) what kind of images are present and what do those images reveal about women's position in the culture? (2) whose images are they and whom do they serve? (3) what are the consequences of those images? and (4) how do such images have meaning?

Friedan looked at images in women's magazines in particular, comparing fictional heroines prior to and following World War II. The message in post-World War II magazines had become what Friedan named the 'feminine mystique', the fulfillment of femininity through women's roles as housewives as women's highest value and only commitment. Frieden explored the consequences of those messages for women by conducting extensive interviews with eighty women; she discovered a schizophrenic split between what they believed should be a fulfilling role in life and the actual isolation and despair they felt about their own lives. While the images may have been detrimental to women, they did nevertheless serve a function. 'Why is it never said', Friedan observed, 'that the really crucial function, the really important role that women serve as housewives, is to buy more things for the house' (p. 206).

Some of the work on images that followed Friedan's came from women within the mass media industries who focused on the fact that popular culture images are for the most part men's images of women. Through class action suits some drew the connection between the discriminatory employment conditions in the industries and the decision-making processes that created those images. A collection of critiques by women working within the media appeared in 1974, compiled by the Media Women's Association (Strainchamps, 1974). One woman complained: 'The editorial message driven home by the *Ladies' Home Journal* to date is that women are meant to be totally passive, ever-suffering, second-class citizens whose greatest fulfillment in life is having their collective psyche divined by the out-of-touch men, the editors and advertisers, who determine the content of this magazine' (p. 46).

Other feminists looked at the longer historical tradition of women's images. As Fishburn points out, the myth that there is a quintessentially American woman has remained constant, but the myth changes (1982, p. 4). Carol Wald (1975) collected visual images of women in popular culture items through a period of eighty years: trading cards, postage stamps, pin-ups. Kathryn Weibel (1977) looked at images since the nineteenth century of women in fiction, television, movies, women's magazines and magazine advertising, and fashion. She concluded that popular culture has consistently portrayed [white] American women as 'housewifely, passive, wholesome, and pretty' (p. ix). She draws a connection between the type of images presented and whether they are created by men or women:

> It's true that over the years many women have created and consumed the traditional passive, domestic female images with relish. But it also seems true that the greater the

> control women have exerted over popular culture images, the less passive and domestic they have been and the more reflective of women's work and commitments outside the home. Conversely, the greater the influence of men over a particular medium at a particular time, the more traditional and outdated the images have been. (p. 244)

Women of color have had additional critiques to make of women's images in popular culture. Jill Lewis and Gloria Joseph (*Common Differences*, 1981) note that, in advertising, Black women must 'become White', pose, dress, and make themselves up like White women, before they can compete and gain status and security by having a man: 'The concept of beauty for women is based on White male values – the values of those who are empowered to make the rules' (p. 159). bell hooks examines the negative images of Black womanhood in the mass media, especially television:

> Negative images of black women in television and film are not simply impressed upon the psyches of white males, they affect all Americans. Black mothers and fathers constantly complain that television lowers the self-confidence and self-esteem of black girls. Even on television commercials the black female child is rarely visible – largely because sexist-racist Americans tend to see the black male as the representative of the black race. (hooks, 1981, p. 66)

The negative stereotypes and invisibility of Asian American, Native American, Black, and Chicana women have been pointed out by the writers in Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's edited book, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by radical women of color* (1981).

Mainstream social science communication researchers became interested in women's relationship to popular culture during the 1970s. Given this research tradition's historical emphasis on audience effects research and its increasing interest in the relationship between content and effects during the time period, it is not surprising that it would enter the discussion from this approach. The *Journal of Communication* devoted its Spring 1974 issue to nine reports focusing on media content and women's roles, signaling a legitimization of the subject area. *Hearth and Home: Images of women in the mass media* (Tuchman, Daniels, and Benet (eds)), published in 1978, is an often-cited collection of quantitative content analyses and other empirical studies on the content of effects of television, magazines, and newspapers. Gaye Tuchman (p. 5) characterized the mass media's treatment of women as 'symbolic annihilation', in that women are underrepresented and trivialized by the media.

Public policy and media industry involvement have been most likely to arise out of this approach to popular culture. The US Commission on Civil Rights, for example, prepared a report in 1977, updated in 1979, that summarized social science research on the portrayal of women and minorities in television and on employment problems, making recommendations to the Federal Communications Commission. The advertising industry issued a report in 1975 recommending changes in the portrayal of women in advertising (National Advertising Review Board, 1975).

The usefulness of the concept of 'images' and the assumptions that underlie it has become a subject for discussion among feminists, leading some to suggest new ways of

conceptualizing media content, as discourse, myth, fantasy, or representation, and attending to the fourth question suggested above, how images have meaning. Noreene Janus' critique ('Research on sex-roles in the mass media' in *The Insurgent Sociologist*, 1977) pointed out that 'images' research, usually conducted by US liberal feminists, implicitly assumes that sexism can be eradicated within the present economic system, reaffirming the very framework that creates those images. Elizabeth Cowie (1977) and Griselda Pollock (1977) have both argued that the concept of 'images of women' should be replaced with the notion of woman as a signifier in ideological discourses. Images have meanings because they exist in other discourses as well. Gaye Tuchman (1979) suggested that concepts of images should be replaced with frame analyses or concepts of myth, since images can never be veridical accounts of reality. Rosalind Coward (1982) has argued that sexist codes that specify how an image can be read, not specific images per se, are the problem for feminist critics.

Feminist psychoanalysis, particularly as developed in film theory, has also suggested that content can be examined differently from the implied position of viewer, with women seen as functioning (in Classical Hollywood movies, at least) as a construction of male fantasy. Such feminist psychoanalytic film theory work as Laura Mulvey's 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' (1975), E. Ann Kaplan's *Women and Film: Both sides of the camera* (1983), and Janet Walker's review article, 'The problem of sexual difference and identity' (1984) represent a different kind of discussion of the representation of women, while sharing the basic focus on content with others in this approach.

The Recovery and Reappraisal Approach

While examining, cataloging, and criticizing images of women may have been the earliest of the contemporary feminist approaches to popular culture and a major one for both members of the women's movement and mainstream social science researchers, another approach came on its heels from the humanities – art, literature, and social history. Feminists approaching popular culture from this direction have been interested in these questions: (1) given a male-dominated culture, how have women managed to express themselves? (2) why has women's creativity been overlooked, undervalued or ignored? (3) how do men's and women's creativity differ? (4) what are women's stories and myths?

Rather than suggesting that changing women's portrayal within popular culture content will solve the problem, feminists in this approach are more likely to place a positive value on women's culture as something distinct from men's culture, something that should be recovered and encouraged. Rather than focusing on men's images of women, they focus on women's images of themselves and women's stories about their own experiences.

The recovery process has included searching for the lost voices of women and constructing a matriarchal creative heritage. Often those voices have been found outside the dominant culture; other times they have been found in popular culture

reaching a female audience. Alison Adburgham (1972) uncovered a long and rich history of women writers in Great Britain in a time period particularly hostile to such a role.

> This book should be regarded as rescue work. It salvages pre-Victorian periodicals from the limbo of forgotten publications, and exhumes from long undisturbed sources a curious collection of women who, at a time when it was considered humiliating for a gentlewoman to earn money, contrived to support themselves by writing, editing or publishing . . . sometimes even supporting husbands and children as well. (Adburgham, 1972, p. 9)

This social history corrects myths and fills gaps about women's history as writers and publishers and their connection to popular culture as producers as well as consumers. It begins with Aphra Behn, author of seventeen 'licentious' plays, who died in 1689, travels through numerous periodicals written for and by women, including a popular one dedicated to mathematical puzzles, and ends with the beginning of the Victorian era. During this time, female literacy rose and light fiction became popular with women in all classes. Most women writers, however, were scorned by the male intellectual elite because of their 'low-brow' appeal.

Another work that attempts to reconstruct a lost history of women's relationship to popular culture as producers and as consumers is Ann Douglas' history of nineteenth century American culture (Douglas, 1977). Douglas has argued that there is an intimate connection between Victorian culture and modern mass culture. Her thesis is that in the nineteenth century middle-class Protestant women and the disaffected male clergy took over 'culture' as their special province, changing the literary scene with their preoccupation with sentimentalism and establishing the anti-intellectualism still prevalent today. Sympathetic to their motives and necessities for doing so, she argues that the clergy and middle class women had lost their practical function in the new economic order, so they used 'cultural' as their vehicle for exercising power.

The novel in particular has been retrieved and re-evaluated by feminists as one available and popular forum in which women, white women in particular, could speak to other women. Josephine Donovan ('The Silence is Broken', 1980) has noted that prior to the nineteenth century women were denied access to Latin rhetorical training and hence to the symbolic tools to create public art: 'Only when the Latin influence had weakened, when serious prose was being written in the vernaculars, and in a nontraditional form, and only after the rhetoric of the home and of the forum had once again merged, could women hope to have equal access to the means of literary creation' (p. 216). The novel, as a new form with no classical models or rules one needed to know in order to write it and with its capacity to deal with the details of everyday life in a 'plain' rather than 'high' style, was particularly suited for adoption by women as a legitimated form of literary expression. Madonne Miner (1984) has suggested that novels popular with women readers today share a common, white, middle class 'women's story' that can be traced to its nineteenth century predecessors, suggesting a matrilineal literary tradition.

The literary and artistic tradition of Black women has survived even in the face of a history of denials of access to its creation, as Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith (1982) have explained:

> As a major result of the historical realities which brought us enslaved to this continent, we have kept separated in every way possible from recognized intellectual work. Our legacy as chattel, as sexual slaves as well as forced laborers, would adequately explain why most Black women are, to this day, far away from the centers of academic power and why Black women's studies has just begun to surface in the latter part of the 1970s. What our multilayered oppression does not explain are the ways in which we have created and maintained our own intellectual traditions as Black women, without either the recognition or the support of white-male society. (p. xviii)

Black women, Barbara Smith has pointed out (in 'Toward a black feminist criticism', 1982), have a literary tradition paralleling that of Black men and white women, but its themes, styles, and aesthetics reflect their particular political, social, and economic experiences that make it very different from white-male literary convention.

Feminist critics have been particularly prone to criticizing the formalist tradition that divorces a cultural product from its historically situated context and to challenging the notion that criticism is an objective practice that can claim universal judgments. Janet Wolff (1981), for example, works from the premise that '[a]rt is a social product', historically and culturally situated, not the creation of 'genius' transcending time and society (p. 1). This starting point requires an understanding of how social institutions affect '*who* becomes an artist, *how* they become an artist, how they are able to *practice* their art, and how they can ensure that their work is produced, performed, and *made available* to a public' (p. 40), as well as the ways in which value is ascribed to various forms and genres by certain groups.

Lillian Robinson (1978) has noted that stripping art and literature of their historical meaning and transporting them to the realm of universals denies all but the dominant white elite their full historical identity, and it is no accident that they do. Popular culture and 'high' culture, she argues, carry an ideology which serves certain segments of society. Feminist criticism provides a better way to understand our experiences as historical beings, especially those who because of race, class, or gender, have learned to view themselves as the 'other' in cultural practices.

Tania Modleski (1982) has pointed out the double critical standard that male critics have applied to women's popular culture – novels and soap operas – as compared to their aggrandizement of popular male genres. She has suggested that criticism of female culture cannot simply 'plug into' categories used in studies of male popular culture. The disdain with which both men and women critics have tended to view women's popular culture has prevented them from seeing how it speaks to the real problems and tensions in women's lives (p. 14).

The category called here the Recovery and Reappraisal Approach most directly challenges traditional notions of high and low art, folk art, and popular culture. It calls not for adding women artists to a literary or artistic canon but for a re-evaluation of the criteria that establish canons and determine the artistic and social merit of creative

expressions. It calls for challenges to the social, political, and economic structures that discourage women from their own creativity and myth-making. It suggests that popular culture has both served women's creativity and expression and excluded it in complex ways, providing some means for women to articulate their experiences, despite the disdain of critics, and yet in other ways barring women from active creativity in myth-making and story telling, providing women with male myths, drowning out their own cultural heritage and what they have had to say about their own lives.

The Reception and Experience Approach

This feminist approach to popular culture focuses on readers and viewers of cultural products, their experiences and perceptions. It has taken an appreciative view of women and their interactions with cultural products within their particular social situations and frames of understanding. This approach can be traced back to Betty Friedan's interviews with women, the means by which she discovered the discrepancy between popular culture messages and women's feelings about their own lives. It is implicit in much early activism, as women who were the intended audiences for popular culture expressed their outrage over images of women in television programming and advertising. More recently, feminist scholarship has focused on those cultural forms that are popular with women to understand how those forms function for women and for patriarchy. This approach would seem to hold a particular appeal to feminists because it captures a basic commitment of most feminists: to provide women the means of speaking about their own understanding of their lives and their experiences. As Dorothy Smith has reminded us, 'The distinctive and deep significance of consciousness raising at an earlier period of the women's movement was precisely this process of opening up what was personal, idiosyncratic, and inchoate and discovering with others how this was shared, was objectively part of women's oppression, finding ways of speaking of it and ways of speaking it politically' ('A sociology for women', 1979, p. 144).

A number of feminists have commented upon the need for and value of this approach. Michèle Mattelart, for example, has made this comment:

> [T]here are a great many studies of media power structures, national and international, and a great many too of the content of media messages, but very few on the manner in which the 'dominated' groups and individuals read and respond to them, or oppose to them a specific manner of, precisely, appropriation, and resist them . . . in the name of some project of their own. (Mattelart, 1982, p. 141)

Referring to the popularity of the melodramatic serial, she pointed out that the question of taste and pleasure produced by these products cannot be ignored. In the case of this particular fictional genre, she has suggested that its popularity may depend on its correspondence to the psychic structure of female subjective time.

Angela McRobbie, following a reading of the ideology operating in the British teen magazine *Jackie*, pointed out how popular the magazine is with teen girls, based on

sales figures, yet cautioned: 'Of course this does not mean that its readers swallow its axioms unquestioningly. And indeed until we have a clearer idea of just how girls "read" *Jackie* and encounter its ideological force, our analysis remains one-sided' (McRobbie, 1982, p. 283).

Dorothy Hobson's analysis of soap operas (1982) is an attempt to understand the popularity of the British series *Crossroads* from the standpoint of its viewers. She studied viewers in their homes as they watched the program, observing how the program fit into the structure of their home roles. Hobson challenges the usual critical judgments that viewers watch to escape. She found that viewers watched because of their involvement over time with particular characters and because they were interested in resolutions to problems they recognized as shared by other women in the program and in real life. She concluded:

> They [the viewers] do not sit there watching and taking it all in without any mental activity or creativity. It seems that they expect to contribute to the production which they are watching and bring their own knowledge to augment the text. Stories which seem almost too fantastic for an everyday serial are transformed through a sympathetic audience reading whereby they strip the storyline to the idea behind it and construct an understanding of the skeleton that is left. (p. 136)

Janice Radway's ethnographic study of a group of romance readers (1984) is a similar project in understanding the popularity or this genre and how it functions for women within the context of their own lives. The readers she studied saw their act of reading as a minor act of independence that allowed them to assert their need for time and space away from the demands made on them in their roles as primary family caretakers. The readers did not view the heroines of the romances they preferred as weak and passive but as independent and assertive. The heroines were seen as victorious because the hero came to acknowledge the primacy of the female world of love and human relations over the public world of fame and success. Radway has suggested that romance novels may be seen as an exploration of the meaning of patriarchy for women. They provide readers a minor resistance to patriarchy, a moment where patriarchy is imagined as transformed, while at the same time restoring women to their role within it as it currently exists.

Approaching popular culture from the standpoint of women's experiences with cultural forms presents feminists with a central tension in feminism. That is, it presents feminists with the challenge of respecting other women's understanding of their own lives, though that understanding may be different from a feminist reading of their situation. It also, however, presents feminists with a central objective of feminism, the opportunity for activism and change as feminists come to better understand how other women function within patriarchy. Dorothy Smith (1979) has identified the ruptures between women's experiences and the social forms of expression available to talk about them. Women's encounters with popular culture may be an important site where those ruptures can be made visible and available for critique and development.

The Cultural Theory Approach

While any feminist approach to popular culture contains at the least an implicit critique of the social structure and the organization of social relations, there is a body of feminist theory that focuses on the organization and production of culture in general.[3] Rather than looking at the content or uses of popular culture, as the previous categories did, this feminist approach requires us to stand back from popular culture to see the larger set of social and economic arrangements that produce culture and to see their implications for women's position and experience.

One theme that runs through much of feminist cultural theory is that men and women live in two different spheres and have two different cultural experiences. Elizabeth Janeway (1971) has related women's subordinate position in society to social myths that have restricted women's access to the public world by confining them to the private sphere. Despite the fact that separate spheres have existed since ancient times, Janeway has argued that this is socially determined, not innate or inevitable. The goal should be not two, but one, androgynous culture: 'One might describe these changes as the tendency for woman's place and role to expand and take over man's world: to feminize it, as the first women's movement aimed to do' (p. 305). Jessie Bernard (1981), however, has described these two separate spheres as inevitable. Bernard's solution to a female world that is currently in a state of 'cultural siege' (pp. 458–9) is not to attempt to create an androgynous society but to change the quality of those two worlds: 'Sometimes discussed by feminists are the pros and cons of separatism as a deliberate policy. Actually, the separatism is there, whether it is deliberately sought or rejected on ideological principles. The basic issue is not whether to encourage it but how best to use it' (p. 11). Women need to recover their own culture to assume control over the definition of their own world, according to Bernard.

Mary Daly (1978) has made separatism a goal to counteract the deleterious effects of male culture: 'Women's minds have been mutilated and muted . . . women become eager for acceptance as docile tokens mouthing male texts, employing technology for male ends, accepting male fabrications as the true texture of reality. Patriarchy has stolen our cosmos and returned it in the form of *Cosmopolitan* magazine and cosmetics' (p. 5). Feminists should instead continue their subversive acts of creating women's own culture, 'creating new forms of writing, singing, celebrating, cerebrating, searching' (p. xv).

Angela McRobbie's critique of youth culture and subculture sociological analysis ('Settling accounts with subcultures: a feminist critique', 1980) takes a different categorization of cultures and challenges the radical celebrative analyses of subcultures that see them as subversive and oppositional to dominant cultures. Not only are boys' subcultures often cruelly anti-woman and exploitative of girls, girls' subcultures do not often contain the same possibilities for resistance and rebellion.

Another area of theorizing has been in understanding how women function symbolically in male culture. Sherry Ortner ('Is female to male as nature is to culture?', 1974) described women's symbolic role in male culture as existing in different societies in three positions in relation to culture and nature: (1) in a middle position between culture and nature, lower than man and culture but higher than nature; (2) as a

mediating element in the relationship between culture and nature necessitating restrictions on women's functions so that role can be performed; (3) in an ambiguous position, with polarized and contradictory meanings, where women may on occasion be aligned with culture. These symbolic positions of women become institutionalized in a culture, requiring a change in institutions along with cultural symbolism for a change in women's position to occur. Elizabeth Cowie (1978) has challenged Claude Lévi-Strauss' analysis of kinship and communication based on the exchange of women. Cowie has argued that in order for women to have value within a system of exchange, that valuation must have existed prior to the exchange system. Culture cannot then be reduced to the exchange system as its essence, since it must exist prior to it for hierarchical social values to be established. Those social values are produced and reproduced in cultural practices such as image-producing systems.

Dorothy Smith (1978) has focused on how women are excluded from the communicative work of society because of the development of an 'Ideological apparatus':

> . . . women have largely been excluded from the work of producing the forms of thought and the images and symbols in which thought is expressed and ordered. There is a circle effect. Men attend to and treat as significant only what men say. The circle of men whose writing and talk was significant to each other extends backwards in time as far as our records reach. What men were doing was relevant to men, was written by men about men for men. Men listened and listen to what one another said. (Smith, 1978, p. 281)

This silencing of women and making them and their experiences invisible is a common theme in feminist theory. Smith here has made it particularly relevant to the question of who has access to the means of cultural expression and production.

British Marxist feminists have been dealing with the question of, as phrased by Michèle Barrett, 'what is the relationship between women's oppression and the general features of a mode of production?' (Barrett, 1980, p. 97). Barrett has come at the question from the standpoint of the ideology of gender, produced and reproduced in cultural practice. She has identified three elements in the process of the construction of an ideology of gender: production, consumption, and representation. About production she has pointed out that the conditions under which men and women produce literature are materially different, using Virginia Woolf's analysis from *A Room of One's Own*. About consumption she has noted there has been a failure to develop a theory of reading, so that an account of consumption and reception of texts from the point of view of the ideology of gender is not yet possible. She has suggested that representation of gender can be profitably thought about in terms of stereotyping in content, compensation (presenting imagery and ideas that elevate the moral value of femininity), collusion (attempts to manipulate women's consent to their subordination as well as women's consent to oppression) and recuperation (negating and diffusing challenges to the dominant meaning of gender).

Feminist cultural theory, as these selections from feminist writings suggest, locates popular culture within a broader context of women's relationships to the means of symbolic production and expression and within a larger struggle to understand and change social relations and organization.

Summary

What has been presented here is a broad and incomplete outline of feminist approaches to popular culture. Yet even this sampling of feminist work demonstrates the breadth of areas that are being examined and the diversity of starting points and proposed solutions. It should by now be apparent that a feminist analysis of popular culture does not just mean critiquing a cultural product – whether it be a romance novel, an advertisement, or a musical hit – as sexist or nonsexist. Feminists approaching popular culture proceed from a variety of theoretical positions that carry with them a deeper social analysis and political agenda. The academic 'popular culture debates', as they continue to be fought over theories of society and the role of popular culture, should pause to hear what feminists are saying. Feminists are saying that popular culture plays a role in patriarchal society and that theoretical analysis of this role warrants a major position in ongoing discussions.

Notes

1. While I am aware of the discussion within feminism, particularly by Marxist feminists, about the use of the term 'patriarchy' and the desire by some to restrict its use to a particular historic time period characterized by the literal 'rule of the father' or to reserve it for describing 'patriarchal relations' between men and women (see Michèle Barrett, 1980), I prefer the widespread feminist practice of using the term broadly, here referring to societies characterizable by the figurative 'rule of the father'. I hope my discussion in this essay illustrates the value of placing such a term next to other theories of society.
2. It seems appropriate here to take up Barbara Smith's challenge (in 'Toward a black feminist criticism', 1982, p. 162) that white women should acknowledge who and what are being left out of their own research and writing. While I have attempted to be self-aware of my own position as a white woman approaching this topic, I realize that my work here cannot fully address the perspectives women of color bring to the subject. This work, then, should be seen as partial and exploratory, and the beginning of what I hope might become a larger collaborative project by many women in constructing and asserting feminist theories of popular culture.
3. A body of related and relevant feminist work could more generally be called social theory because it deals with the organization of social life – the division of labor and production and reproduction, concepts of the public and the private, the role of the family, and the role of the state and other institutions of control. However, that work will not be considered here in the interest of remaining closer to the subject matter of popular culture.

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