

FEMINISM AND CULTURAL STUDIES

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Rosalind Coward. *Female Desires: How They Are Sought, Bought and Packaged*. New York: Grove Press, 1985.

Christine Griffin. *Typical Girls? Young Women From School To the Job Market*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance, Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

We are heavy with bodies. If men bore children, we imagine, that they would burst from their heads, not their asses, and be fully grown, and dressed, and godlike, with no need to eat, no substance pouring from their substance. But we are mothers...

Susan Griffin¹

In attempting to think through the relation of cultural studies to feminism the first question that arises for me is, does feminism need the former? The converse question can here be briefly answered in the affirmative. Perhaps the most important contribution that feminism has brought to cultural studies is the debate over issues of subjectivity and sexuality. While the impact of feminism has been problematic within the field of cultural studies (Stuart Hall has recently pointed to the

“bifurcation of the theoretical project”²), it has brought to the fore many interesting issues. Apart from their insistence on formulating materialist theories of ideology, feminists have also pointed to rather glaring absences in male (sub) cultural research. Thus, on both material and epistemological levels one may say that, along with its problematic aspects, feminism has become integral to the cultural studies’ project.

In returning to the first question, I would like to ground a necessarily brief discussion of these issues in a North American context. It seems fair to say that most North American feminists would laud the differing theorizations of ‘living in and with difference’ that have been the hallmark of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. As the quote from Susan Griffin makes clear, the issues of reproduction and the family, and the problematic positioning of women within these discourses, are central to the North American feminist project. One might think that it would be rather difficult to be involved with these concerns and ignore the specificity of women’s difference. A central tenet of Canadian feminism, as exemplified in the work of Mary O’Brien amongst others, has indeed come to be articulated around theorizations of women’s values. Stemming again from the problematic of reproduction, this work attempts to re-articulate women’s specificity from the flattened out annals of history. This research is needed in that it brings to our attention the historical absence of women’s experience in Western philosophy. However, much more focused historical research is called for if we are to reveal the complex interactions between discourses and the struggles and negotiations of those positioned by them. Abstract theorizations about a generalized women’s specificity do not always correspond to the experiences and contradictions of women living out the discourses of the family and reproduction. From a political perspective, these sites and others have become the new battleground, as the right ever increasingly attempts to appropriate them. And this is no mere abstract attack, as we witness the defeat of the ERA movement in America, and the attempt to dismantle abortion and other rights in Canada. It is particularly difficult and heart-breaking that this onslaught is lead and supported by a movement which links ultra-rightist male ideology with REAL women (and other neoconservative ‘feminine-ist’ groupings). Thus it is that the hard-won gains by feminists are currently being eroded in the name of preserving the family. Part of the success of the new right in appropriating the family and motherhood is their re-articulation of ‘naturalist’ assumptions. By constructing universal and ahistorical conceptions of ‘motherhood’ and the family, the right builds a narrative that may be seductive to women. How then do we struggle against the appropriation of these sites that are so politically crucial to feminism?

In the light of this right-wing swing in both the States and Canada one is tempted to say that North American feminism 'needs' any help it can get. With this in mind I would like to consider these three texts, which for this particular exegesis will be taken as representative of three approaches within feminist cultural studies.

Of the three, Griffin's *Typical Girls?* comes closest to the type of work associated with the Centre in Birmingham. By this I mean that her methodology is entirely that of 'open interviews', with hardly a trace of abstract theorizing. This is not to say that *Typical Girls?* is unsophisticated; it is a fine piece of ethnomethodology. From a wider epistemological and political point of view, its importance lies in the way that Griffin takes a concrete instance, the 'common-sense' assumptions about teenage girls, and methodically unravels it. Here we can see the legitimating discourses of the school, the family and the job market, which construct 'normal' roles for young women. Griffin's research makes it clear that racism and sexism ("they can't be British they ain't white," or "female apprentices were seen as exceptions proving the rule that engineering was not really women's work") rest on shared understandings of what is naturally acceptable. Through her grounded research with English school-leavers, their guidance teachers, and the eventual bosses, Griffin looks at how the 'given' categories for girls are continually reproduced, and also how these young women negotiate them. It is precisely at this juncture, between discourse and experience, that the strengths of feminist cultural theory begin to emerge. In listening to the specific voices in Griffin's book we hear not only the obvious: that the institutions have to an extent positioned these young women. More importantly, these voices also tell of the micro-politics of the day-to-day negotiation of sexuality, race, gender, class and family.

In *Female Desires*, Rosalind Coward has put together a collection of essays that each tug at societal constructions of women's pleasures. This elegant but incomplete book offers us a kaleidoscope of the mythologies that we inhabit. Whether it be sex, the family meal, or the never-ending (perhaps the key to its narrative success) soap of the Royals, Coward presents us with the imaginary extensions of ourselves which supposedly contain the kernel of our desire. Reminiscent of Barthes in *Mythologies*, she jostles these narratives in order to reveal the power relations that structure them.

But while we do see these "representations of female pleasure as 'producing'... feminine positions" (p. 16), Coward does not really enter into the mechanisms which sustain us in them. By not going into more detail as to how these positions may variously affect us, she risks over-privileging the practices she analyses. In a similar manner, she states that she does not treat "female desire as something universal, unchange-

able, arising from the female condition" (p. 16). However, there is meager evidence of the material conditions that support our fictions of pleasure. Coward does strip the veneer off these reified baubles of desire, but without a deeper analysis of their importance, we feel nothing of their power to differently position. Coward concludes with a wonderful montage of quotations from Freud, Foucault, Sappho, Atwood, and others, but this also tells nothing of their difference. In ignoring the very different analytic perspectives from which these authors problematize the site of desire, Coward gives us moving images instead of a theoretical 'tool-box.'

So far the texts that I've briefly discussed have not been overly problematic in either subject-matter or methodology. Griffin takes the concrete experience of young women in Birmingham, and Coward deconstructs the myths of our pleasuring. While working at different levels, they do identify a rich density within the research in feminist cultural studies. Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* however, raises deep questions and hesitations which I can only sketch out here. Radway takes on an extremely sensitive area: women reading romantic fiction, and one that certainly merits serious thinking by feminists. It is a problematic area which like a black-hole swallows up many different concerns (mass communication research, ethnomethodology, popular culture, sociology and so on). Within these various fields we find differing methods for attacking the nebulous phenomenon of women engaging in this seemingly harmless pass-time. Feminist scholars, such as Tania Modleski, Ann Douglas and Ann Snitow, amongst others (that Radway critiques), have done much to show how romances reproduce the conditions of possibility for women's domination – and for the acceptance of physical and psychological violence. It is not an easy subject-matter to approach and even less so to research, seeped as it is with women's seemingly willing participation in patriarchy. Nonetheless, Radway makes an effort to recapture the act of reading the romance. Unfortunately, her methodology does her in; copious survey questions as to the family income, level of education, religious preference, etc., serve to further entrench established conceptions of the romance reader. Key to the problems that I have with this book, is that Radway renders her sample group fictionalized under the name of the 'Smithton women'. These women who live in the midwest "surrounded by corn and hay fields" (p. 46) become Everywoman and hence flatten out any real understanding we might hope to gain of how women actually do use romances to negotiate patriarchal discourses. Within this framework her research into the reading practices of the women studied gives us little to build on. As Radway puts it in the conclusion: "if... the reader remains unsure as to whether the romance should be considered fundamentally

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conservative on the one hand or incipiently oppositional on the other, that is not surprising" (p. 209). No, it is not; even Radway's feminist impulse can not save her from the snares of a social scientific epistemology.

So, what conclusions can we draw from these rather scattered readings about the objectives of feminist/cultural studies? At the least this articulation requires that we look at specific discourses which place women. At the most, our questioning of these practices should compel us to take into account how women negotiate societal constructs. This nexus requires that we undertake what Valerie Walkerdine has identified as "a historical analysis... of the complex interplay of conditions of possibility in a way which centrally implicate[s] forms of political, psychological and educational argument and struggle as well as the matter of the individuals and groups who [are] so positioned in these struggles."³ Put simply, it seems to me that this demands not only concrete historical research, but also an approach that continually asks how we live with ourselves: the filigree of body, biography and mediation. The work of Coward and Griffin exemplifies two strains, which if brought together would come close to approaching Walkerdine's admittedly difficult challenge. Coward's deconstructionist strength lies in asking how we deal with seeing fragments of ourselves perfected and naturalized in books, in ads, and in another's eyes. Combined with Griffin's ethnomethodological approach we may consider how the everyday sites of getting a job, or eating a family meal, are also the nexus for both the reproduction and negotiation of discourses. The strength of an articulation of feminism and cultural studies is that we can at least start from there.

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Notes

1. Cited in Kim Chernin, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1981), p. 76.
2. Stuart Hall "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates", *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2, 1985: 103.
3. Valerie Walkerdine, "Developmental psychology and the child-centred pedagogy: the insertion of Piaget into early education," in Julien Henriques, et al., eds., *Changing the Subject*, (London: Methuen, 1984). p. 200.