

In: Curran, Morley & Walkerline (eds.) *Cultural Studies*  
 14 and *Communications*. London: Arnold, 1996.

## Feminism and Media Consumption

Christine Geraghty

This essay suggests a framework for feminist work on female consumers of film and television fiction since the publication of Laura Mulvey's influential and powerful essay on visual pleasure and Hollywood cinema in 1975. The range of work on female audiences is now extensive and complex and cannot be contained within a single history; I have chosen, therefore, to focus on certain key debates which I hope will provide a framework for students when they go on to read material which is not directly referred to here. This essay is constructed around two axes. First, there are the different histories and disciplines of work on the female consumer in film theory and in television studies, differences which have led critics to trace out markedly different trajectories for the two areas of study. Second, there are the double connotations of the word 'consumption' itself, associated on one hand with fictions 'consuming' and inappropriately absorbing the female reader and, on the other, with the reader deliberately choosing her own fictions, despite the condescending or critical attitude of those around her. To make this study manageable, I have chosen to look first at the work done on one set of images – the concept of the mother in film and television studies – and to use that figure to examine what is at stake when feminist criticism focuses on the female consumer. With this as a base, I shall outline some of the key issues around representation and identification, before concluding with some comments about the way in which film and television theory has worked with the notion of femininity and the implications of constructing women as audience.

Work on the relationship between text and audience has tended to emphasize the difference between television/viewers and film/spectators. Such a distinction has hinged on film theory's attachment to the concept of a spectatorial position created by the text and understood through psychoanalytic discourses; and work in television studies on the social context in which viewing of a particular programme takes place. Shaun Moores, for instance, in comparing work on cinema and television audiences, points to the lack of 'qualitative empirical work on the public settings of cinema spectatorship' and suggests that the explanation lies in the 'continuing influence of textual

semiotics and psychoanalytical perspectives in film studies' (Moores 1993: 33). Jackie Stacey, whose work on film fans itself challenges the model, characterizes the feminine spectator of film studies as 'passive', 'unconscious' and 'pessimistic' in contrast with the viewer presented by the cultural studies/television tradition as 'active', 'conscious' and 'optimistic' (Stacey 1994: 24).

I want to explore this distinction and how it has developed in relation to the female consumer, but I also want to work with concepts of representation and identification which, while they might be deployed in different ways, provide common ground and a shared history for the two traditions. It is no accident, for instance, that the figure of the mother features so strongly in work on film melodrama on one hand and television soap opera on the other, providing, in both instances, studies of how the female consumer of stories of a mother's position might understand and enjoy the fictions being offered. Work done on the mother then provides a concrete example of the way in which feminist work on the consumer has developed.

### The Figure of the Mother

In film studies, as we shall see, Mulvey's original article had raised the question of the female spectator in the cinema despite the way in which she ignored it. Mulvey posited a male gaze and yet films were not male-only zones like pin-ups or striptease; women went to the cinema and certain genres seemed to be made specifically for them. Work on 'the woman's film' and the 'maternal melodrama' offered the opportunity to examine the nature of women's pleasure in films which, characteristically for a women's genre, tended to be dismissed as 'weepies'. In many of these films such as *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz, US, 1945), both versions of *Imitations of Life* (Stahl, US, 1934 and Sirk, US, 1959) and *All that Heaven Allows* (Sirk, US, 1955), the mother's role was central to the narrative.

The debate around the figure of the mother in such films can be usefully exemplified by the exchange between E. Ann Kaplan and Linda Williams around the film *Stella Dallas* (Vidor, US, 1937). In 'The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*' (1990), first published in 1983, and a later article, 'Mothering, Feminism and Representation' (1987), Kaplan outlines the way in which motherhood had developed as a discursive category in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction and in sociological and psychological work on mothering and childcare. She identifies the prevalence of themes of sacrifice and devotion, the lack of interest in the needs of the mother as compared with the child and the polarity, developed in Freudian theory, of figures of the Good and Bad Mother. She traces a developing tendency from the 1930s to blame the mother for the child's problems and argues that by the 1940s and 1950s the mother has herself become the problem: 'aberrations in the grown-up child are her fault' (Kaplan, 1987: 130). It is in this context that Kaplan discusses the representation of *Stella Dallas*, a working-class mother bringing up her daughter, Laurel, on her own; at the end of the film, *Stella* separates herself from her daughter so that Laurel can marry into the upper-class milieu which is more 'appropriate' for her needs. Kaplan suggests that the film criticizes *Stella* as being a mother who over-identifies

with her child, a mother who seeks her own pleasure from mothering. Laurel's welfare can only be secured when the mutuality between mother and daughter is broken and Stella has learned the 'proper construction' (Kaplan 1990: 131) of motherhood, the willingness to sacrifice, to watch from a distance. This lesson is summed up for Kaplan in the film's final image of Stella, standing in the snow to watch through an uncurtained window her daughter's wedding. Kaplan suggests that, as the film works through its narrative, the audience's identification with Stella's resilience and her resistance to traditional modes of mothering is gradually eroded; the source and control of the way we look at Stella, the gaze, is aligned firmly to the position of the upper-class family who 'adopt' Laurel. 'As a Mother, Stella is no longer permitted to control her actions, or be the camera's eye', Kaplan suggests; instead we are invited to look at her as a spectacle 'produced by the upper-class disapproving gaze (a gaze that the audience is made to share through camera work and editing)' (Kaplan 1987: 133). Thus the woman is punished in the narrative by being separated from her child and in the visual structure by becoming the object of the gaze. The sacrifice is literally of the self as the 'Mother-as-spectator' becomes the 'Mother as absent' (Kaplan 1990: 134) and the audience, far from being closely bound to Stella's position, is forced to be distanced from it.

Linda Williams took issue with Kaplan's 1983 reading in her article, 'Something Else Besides a Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the maternal melodrama' (1987), first published in 1984. Williams suggested that *Stella Dallas* was of particular interest because it textually demanded 'a female reading competence' which derived from 'the different way women take on their identities under patriarchy and is a direct result of the social fact of female mothering' (Williams 1987: 305). Stella's excessive femininity and her gradual realization of how her mothering appears to other eyes (those of Laurel, of the upper-class Morrisons) does not so much transfer the gaze as make the spectator conscious of the different roles which women are called on to play as wife and/or mother. Williams goes on to argue that the 'definitive closure' (p. 319) of the ending does not result in a fixed position for the spectator; the spectator is neither totally caught up in Stella's weeping nor distanced from her by the mechanisms outlined by Kaplan. Instead Williams argues that the female spectator shares the emotions generated by Stella's loss but recognizes precisely the patriarchal construction which equates motherhood with sacrifice; she suggests that possibilities for resistance can be glimpsed in the exchanges between mother and daughter and argues that these are not wiped out by the ending. Instead she proposes that

female spectators do not consent to such eradicating solutions ... It is a terrible underestimation of the female viewer to presume that she is wholly seduced by a naive belief in these masochistic images, that she has allowed these images to put her in her place the way the films themselves put their women characters in their place.

(p. 320)

This cursory summary cannot do justice to the complex arguments about the film or indeed the film itself, but from it we can tease out some of the concerns of psychoanalytic feminist film criticism during this period. Firstly, this exchange indicates that the text is not a stand-alone object from which meaning

can be read; both Kaplan and Williams try to place *Stella Dallas* in the context of generic and historical arguments about melodrama and the woman's film. There is also, however, a characteristic debate about the text, about how far the formal resolution of the film's ending ties up or resolves the ideological problems that have been raised, with Kaplan placing much more emphasis on the effectiveness of this closure. Additionally, questions of the accurate representation of women's lives are invoked, though they are addressed somewhat obliquely. Kaplan and Williams both see women's experience of motherhood as a factor in their position as spectators. The position from which the film can best be understood, for which it demands identification, is linked to the gaze of the camera but the question for debate is how far the character of Stella can speak to and for women because her position of mother is recognized by women in the audience who are thereby appealed to as more competent readers. Interestingly also, both Kaplan and Williams, though they differ in other respects, are concerned with issues of over-identification and avoid positing a female spectator who is stereotypically absorbed in the emotional impact of Stella's plight. Kaplan's argument is based on a shifting of sympathy away from Stella while Williams's suggests that the female spectator is aware that she cannot choose a single, absorbing viewpoint but 'must alternate a number of conflicting points of view, none of which can be satisfactorily reconciled' (Williams 1987: 317). For Williams, at least, distance appears to be a political position offering a means of escape from male rhetoric and the imposition of a fixed viewpoint. I will return to some of these issues after we have looked at the way in which the mother was conceptualized in feminist television writing.

Here I shall focus on the literature on soap opera mothers which is extensive – again I can only pick out a very limited number of instances. One striking contrast centres on the nature of the audience's possible identification with the mother figure. On one hand, there is the work on British realist soaps in which, as I suggest in *Women and Soap Opera*, the weakness of the male characters means that the mother is a strong and forceful character who 'takes on the burden of being both the moral and practical support to the family' (Geraghty 1991: 75). In this model, the mother is the prop of the family, sustaining it through an endless series of emotional and practical crises which the other members of the family look to her to resolve. These soap opera mothers of programmes such as *Brookside* and *EastEnders* do complain about their role and sometimes try to resist it but are almost inevitably brought back into a 'structural role of selfless support' (p. 79) which ensures that the family survives. In her struggle, the soap opera mother is frequently supported by female friends with whom she can share her fond contempt for the men of the family and, while her daughters can be a source of further problems, as they grow up and become mothers in turn, they also become part of the female-dominated structure. For women in the audience, it is suggested, 'the matriarchal soap' (p. 74) creates a private space in which women's emotional work and 'competencies' (Brunsdon 1981: 36) in maintaining relationships within families and between friends and neighbours can be recognized and valued.

In contrast and in looking at the different format of US daytime soaps, Tania Modleski suggested that identification with the mother as the heroine of the

programme creates a viewing position in which the viewer and character share certain traditionally feminine qualities. The spectator of soap opera

is constituted as a sort of ideal mother: a person who possesses greater wisdom than all her children, whose sympathy is large enough to encompass the conflicting claims of her family (she identifies with them all) and who has no demands or claims of her own (she identifies with no one character exclusively).

(Modleski 1984: p. 92)

The good mother understands that there are no rigid rights and wrongs in the emotional situations with which she is confronted and is understanding and sympathetic to 'both the sinner and the victim' (p. 93). Modleski related the text to the viewing situation by suggesting that the formal rhythms of soap opera, with its interrupted stories, its manifold strands and its various appeals for attention, matched the rhythms of the housework and childcare being undertaken by the mother while she watched. She emphasized the way in which both soap opera and housework are undervalued and suggested that reasons for this lay in their strong association with femininity.

In different ways, this work on soaps constructs pleasures for the female audience from the text; others have used interviews and questionnaires as the basis for analysis of the soap opera audience. One example of such work would be that of the Tübingen Soap Opera Project team which conducted twenty-six interviews with soap opera viewers in Oregon and particularly looked at whether Modleski's soap opera spectator – the passive and sympathetic 'ideal mother' – might be discovered among these viewers. This audience-based work, reported on by Seiter and others (1991) in '“Don't Treat Us Like We're So Stupid and Naive”: Towards an Ethnography of Soap Opera Viewers', found that far from responding sympathetically to such characters, working-class women viewers, in particular, express 'outrage, anger, criticism, or a refusal to accept a character's problems' (p. 238). The characters who conformed to traditionally feminine models of sympathy and kindness were derided by some of the interviewees as 'whiners' and a number of others commented on 'their preference of strong villainesses' (p. 239). It is not clear from the account whether any of these villainesses were also (less than ideal) mothers but the authors are confident that these women viewers find impossible 'the limitless sympathy that Modleski's textual position demands' (p. 241). There was, however, some evidence that part of the pleasure of soaps lay in their 'potential for reaching out into the real world of the viewers' and while pleasure in unreal fictions was strong, so also was the fiction's applicability 'to their own private situations and to the social roles they were involved in' (p. 236).

These examples of work on the soap opera mother can be used to point to a number of general issues. Soap opera, like melodrama for the film theorists cited above, is understood to be a female genre, providing a format which speaks specifically to women. The domestic space in which the female viewer is addressed is deemed important even to the text-based writers who are concerned with how soap opera representations might function in the context of the private space of the home. Soaps are described as being centrally about personal relationships and emotional dramas which are marked as fictional but which relate to the lived experience of the women watching them. Thus,

central to the debate are arguments about what kinds of representations (the mother, the villainess) are the strongest source of identification, what power the mother figure wields in the programmes, and how far representations of the mother can empower or sustain the female viewer. The nature of the involvement in what is being watched is also important: Modleski stresses the viewer's overwhelming sympathy with the moral dilemmas presented; others such as Brunson stress the way in which soaps engage the audience in the traditionally feminine pleasures of exploring emotional options while the Tübingen group emphasize the way in which their viewers showed both involvement and distance by shouting insults at characters they disliked. What is also striking here is how questions of methodology are brought to the fore. Modleski's textually based, psychoanalytical model is specifically challenged by the Tübingen group on the basis of their work with real viewers, though the limitations of that work ('The "whiner" came up repeatedly in our interviews with a group of six women' (Seiter et al. 1991: 238)) are not much emphasized.

This example of the way in which the mother has been identified and used in film and television studies is inevitably limited; it indicates, however, some of the key issues which arise in work on female consumption: issues around representation, identification, the construction of femininity and the nature of a female audience. It is to these more general issues that I now turn.

## Representation

The initial concern for women looking at both film and television was with how women were (or were not) represented. What image were women being offered of themselves? Christine Gledhill (1984), in a crucial summary essay first published in 1978, drew attention to the argument that '“women as women” are not represented in cinema' (Gledhill 1984: 18) and quoted Sharon Smith, an early contributor to *Women and Film* magazine: 'women, in any fully human form, have been almost completely left out of film' (p. 19). This initial concern was important in that it drew attention, very early on, to the question of women's relationship with their own images on the screen rather than, for instance, their possible pleasures in male stars. However differently inflected over the years, this emphasis on women looking at themselves has remained of consistent interest to feminist writers.

In film theory, the question appeared to be answered by rejecting the assumption that the cinema could offer women the truth of their own position and experience. As Claire Johnston put it, in her highly influential pamphlet *Notes on Women's Cinema* (1973), 'What the camera in fact grasps is the "natural" world of the dominant ideology ... ; the "truth" of our oppression cannot be captured on celluloid with the "innocence" of the camera' (p. 28). Laura Mulvey (1975) drew on this notion that representation involved construction rather than revelation when she asked not only how were women represented in Hollywood films but for whom? Woman in film for Mulvey, as for Johnston, operated not as a representation of reality but as a symbol. The woman's image was a sign, a sign not for women but for men, a sign which indicated a fearful absence or lack which had to be remedied for the male

viewer. The woman's image was created to serve male defence mechanisms against castration; the threat the woman posed through her difference, her lack of a penis, had to be disavowed through her representation as a fetishized object or deflected through the sadistic voyeurism which led in the end to her punishment. The cinematic look is thus based on the defensive need for the male spectator to deal with the sign 'woman' which confronts him with his own inadequacies. The text itself can therefore be best understood by the male spectator, a figure which refers to no actual audience member but to the theoretical position from which it can be best enjoyed. Mulvey, using carefully chosen examples from Hitchcock, Von Sternburg and *film noir*, marked out the way in which the male spectator is allowed to look at the woman but has that look hidden by the movement of the camera and the looks of the characters so that the male gaze becomes Cinema itself. It was this totalizing vision which was to inform feminist film theory for the next decade. It fascinated and infuriated feminists who responded to the bleak assessment of what women represented in Hollywood but could not concur with Mulvey's call to pull down the whole edifice.

In work on the representation of women on television, there was less concern with woman as a sign of male desires and a greater interest in the way in which representation interacted with the social experience of women viewers. This was partly because feminist writers concentrated on 'women's programmes' in which characters, it was argued, were constructed at least in part around female rather than male needs. The interest of British writers in soaps, for instance, had been sparked by an engagement with the strong, independent women whom they featured; Lovell commented that *Coronation Street's* strong, independent, sexually active women who very often worked outside the home represented 'an important extension of the range of imagery which is offered to women within popular forms' (Lovell 1981: 52). Other work built up around television fiction which seemed to be offering women something new and different, such as the British series *Widows* and the US series, *Cagney and Lacey*, both of which used the 'male' thriller/ detective format to appeal to women. Feminist writers responded enthusiastically, if critically, to both series. Julie D'Acci linked *Cagney and Lacey's* notorious production difficulties to questions of representation and suggested that the programme's difficult history 'points to an extreme discomfort on the part of the network with "woman" as represented as non-glamorous, feminist, sexually active and working class and single' (D'Acci 1987: 214). *Widows* too was taken to offer, in Gillian Skirrow's words, 'the achievement of more equal - ie at least a wider variety of - representations of women on mainstream television' (Skirrow 1985: 175). What was valued in both programmes were representations of female friendships in a male world, an emphasis on the domestic and the personal and a change in point of view, whereby the male values in the police/crime series were 'made strange' and the women were recognizable rather than threatening.

It is tempting to make of these different routes into questions of representation a dichotomy between fantasy and realism in which film studies work focused on the woman as sign in a male-dominated fantasy and television studies worked with representations which had their roots in notions of women's reality. An important feature of both film and television theory,

however, is a clear emphasis on the construction of women characters and a refusal, even in television studies, to appeal to an unproblematic realism. The difference in approach, therefore, is based not so much on questions of representation but on possibilities of identification and audience address.

## Identification

Questions of identification are central to discussions about the nature of the female consumer's involvement with representations. Does she identify on the basis of gender, with female characters, with recognizable situations? Is she tearful and absorbed or critical and detached? Can women use the images offered to them or are they inevitably overcome, taken over by them?

It was over the question of identification that the logic of the psychoanalytic position in film theory began to break down. What Mulvey had proposed was not just a spectator's position constructed through the film text but a gendered position which seemed to deny a position for the female spectator except, as Mulvey later suggested, in so far as she could identify with the male protagonist and view herself as spectacle. For others, the position of the female spectator was central. At issue in the debate between Kaplan and Williams were questions of whether women in the audience could identify with Stella and, if so, whether they were identifying with their own negation. Was women's identification inevitably masochistic or were there identifications which supported and empowered women? It was under the pressure of this debate that different views began to emerge.

Some saw possibilities in the very negativity of women's signification in film. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams, writing as editors of *Revision*, an important collection of essays in feminist film criticism, published in 1984, confirmed their understanding of the shift that had taken place in feminist film criticism. This involved a move away from the demand for positive representation which looked for 'an affirmation of female subjectivity'; instead, they acknowledged that women's images in film could be read 'as metaphors of absence, lack and negativity' but declared some optimism about the possibilities for women of taking up negative positions of absence and lack since they were after all 'valorised one(s) ... within modern theories of signification' (Doane et al. 1984: 11). 'Difference as oppressive' could, following French feminists, become 'difference as liberating' (p. 12), a way of evading the rigid boundaries of patriarchal systems of signification which Mulvey had delineated in the Hollywood narrative film.

Perhaps the most bleak position can be represented by Mary Ann Doane, who made an important contribution, developed across a number of books and essays, in which she suggested that, as the male spectatorial position was marked by voyeurism and fetishism in a response to fears of castration, so the female position was determined by her different relationship to castration. She argued that for the girl there had been no point in trying to deny the reality of her lack of a penis and so the distancing mechanisms of fetishism and the sadistic need to punish implicit in voyeurism are not in place. Instead, she suggested that 'the female spectator's desire can be described only in terms of

a kind of narcissism' (Doane 1990: 45) and over-identification. The female spectator wants both to become the image and to weep in identification with the predicaments of the women in the narrative. Thus, Doane argued that what was often taken as the essence of femininity in relation to fiction, 'a closeness, a nearness, as present-to-itself' is in cinema the psychic 'delineation of a place culturally assigned to the woman' (p. 54). Here, *par excellence*, was the female spectator who was over-absorbed in the fiction, consumed by the vision of herself as the Other, rendered defenceless by the paranoia which being looked at induced.

For others, the way out of the dilemma was to deny gender-specific identification and emphasize the play of different positions which could be taken up. Elizabeth Cowie (1988), for instance, argued against the idea that gender in spectatorship was based on a social position (man/woman) taken up before the film started, which determined a response; instead, she proposed a play of look and identification in which masculinity and femininity are not oppositions which fix the spectator but possibilities open to any spectator. Cowie indeed envisages a spectator who appears to be no longer gendered, a gaze which is no longer male and argues that 'there is no single or dominant "view" or look in cinema ... but a continual construction of looks' (p. 137). To look for any understanding of identification in the content of the film, in the character of the heroine or her dilemma, is thus a mistake: 'identification in cinema is a question of continually shifting construction of subject position' (p. 37). When Constance Penley summarizes this approach, specifically male and female viewing positions for Hollywood cinema seem to be disappearing: 'the value of such a model', she suggests, 'is that it leaves open the question of production of sexual difference in the film rather than assuming in advance the sexuality of the character or the spectator' (Penley 1988: 11).

It is sometimes assumed that the psychoanalytic position which emphasized the positioning of the spectator by the film ('Screen theory' as it is sometimes referred to (Morley 1992: 64)) was monolithic in film theory in the late 1970s and early 1980s. But it is important to recognize other voices which were struggling to be heard. Such critics were by no means always hostile to psychoanalysis but – through work on narrative, context and the material formation of women's experience – at least raised questions about how far psychoanalytic accounts could provide answers to the problems posed about the female spectator. Mary Ann Doane might propose that feminist film theory was concerned with the spectator as 'a concept, not a person' (Doane 1989: 142) but the importance of understanding what 'a person' might mean was a refrain during the period. Gledhill suggested as early as 1978 that the female audience was not necessarily compelled by the image of the fetishized woman and that women might identify in other ways with the female image offered to them: 'they pick up codes in the construction of characters and of the female discourse which signal contradictory aspects in the determination of women'. She cited extra-cinematic factors such as 'socioeconomic factors, psychological elements, cultural attributes' (Gledhill 1984: 38) and suggested that these extra-cinematic factors draw on other discourses which are at stake when women watch film. The material effectivity of such discourses, she proposed, was not necessarily wiped out by the dominance of the narrative nor the limits of the spectating position.

Tentatively, work began to emerge which did emphasize the importance of extra-cinematic factors. For some British writers, for instance, consideration of the way in which British cinema had been involved during the Second World War in the construction of national identity offered the opportunity to consider the question of female spectatorship in a specific context. The BFI dossier *Gainsborough Melodramas* provides one example of this kind of work.<sup>2</sup> Pam Cook (1983), in her essay on the woman's picture, argued that any 'discussion of the Gainsborough women's pictures ... should recognise the historical specificity of this female audience as British and wartime or immediately postwar' (p. 21). Sue Harper (1987) extended this to argue that the Gainsborough costume melodrama required 'a high degree of audience creativity' from this historically specific audience, which involved reading against narratives which tended to close down on the heroine's options and instead to understand the meaning of the film through the sensual pleasures of clothes and decor. What is important here is the way in which Harper tried to locate her argument in an understanding of the female audience as socially constructed in the 1940s by the contradictory demands of war work, separated families and the constraints of rationing. Some of this is based on supposition ('Such a view would be compelling to a female workforce resenting its dungarees' (p. 188)) while some is based on Mass-Observation material on, for instance, women's views on costumes and stars ('The film in this survey is favoured by six times as many women as men' (p. 189)). My argument is not whether this historical referencing was successful but that it was done at all and that the specificity of 'this' female audience allowed Harper to challenge more universalist notions of film spectatorship: 'the cardinal sin of male scopophilia does not obtain here.' She concludes her discussion of the fans' identification: 'the female stars ... function as the source of the female gaze both on screen and in the audience' (p. 190).

Other examples could be cited of work which sought to be specific about the particular pleasures certain films offered to women as audiences in specific circumstances – Maria La Place's (1987) essay on *Now Voyager*, for instance, or the interest of Charlotte Brunsdon and others in the new woman's film of the 1970s. I am not claiming that such work was of the same volume or, indeed, was of equal weight with psychoanalytic work on the female spectator. What I would suggest, though, is that it is evidence, in film studies, of continuing concern that work on the possibilities of identification for women spectators should address women as something other than a textual position.

Work on questions of identification for the female television viewer began, as we saw earlier, from a rather different position on representation. Women characters on television were not merely signs of male desires and fear; there was the possibility (by no means always realized) of characters representing women viewers' desires and fears. This is not to say that feminist writers on television continued to demand 'real women' while film criticism moved on to more sophisticated epistemological approaches, but that writers on television worked less problematically with the concept of female spectatorship: television viewing, unlike television production, was not constituted as dominated by the male viewer since certain programmes – soaps – and certain scheduling slots – daytime – seemed to be aimed at women. Work on the television text for the female viewer therefore was able to escape the film theorist's angst over the

theoretical possibility of a viewing position for women and concentrated on the pleasures which might be available to the viewers of particular texts.

In this context, the concept of identification in television viewing was developed in two ways.<sup>1</sup> Firstly, there was identification with particular characters – with, as we have seen, the strong independent women of *Coronation Street* or with the feisty and intelligent Cagney and Lacey. Identification, however, was not so much with characters, it was argued, as with the situation they were in. Thus, Danae Clark argued that *Cagney and Lacey's* capacity to inspire identification lay 'beyond its presentation of a new or "better" image of women', in Cagney and Lacey's capacity to control narrative events and thus challenge 'the boundaries of patriarchal construction' (Clark 1990: 118). The friendship between the characters, the support they gave each other and the way in which their personal lives intertwined with their work were all seen as positive sources of pleasure. Thus, D'Acci points to 'the representation of friendship' between Chris Cagney and Mary Beth Lacey and suggests that it 'opens on to spaces of women's culture and women's communities' (D'Acci 1987: 124). Clark also suggests that 'a woman's space' is created where 'Cagney and Lacey speak to each other without male intervention and are free to explore and affirm the dimensions of female partnership' (Clark: 130).

But as Ien Ang argued, in her work on *Dallas*, apparently very negative representations of women and their situations could also be 'a source of identification and pleasure' (Ang 1990: 77). Ang comments on the way in which the two key women characters, Sue Ellen and Pamela, 'personify two feminine subject-positions which are the result of being trapped in an all-embracing patriarchal structure' (p. 130). She goes on to argue that the pessimism of these two identificatory positions should not be understood as necessarily anti-feminist or 'politically bad' (p. 134). She suggests that the identification with Sue Ellen, in particular, has to be understood in terms of what is under the surface; identification is thus 'connected with a basic if not articulated, awareness of the weighty pressure of reality on one's subjectivity, one's wishes, one's desires' (p. 86). For the woman viewer, then, identification with Sue Ellen can involve the pleasures of letting go, of abandoning the work of constructing the female/feminine self in recognition of the forces which make the task so difficult. Ang thus interestingly combines the notion of being consumed or taken over by a fiction with the concept of choice, whereby the viewer, by turning on the programme and settling down with the box of tissues, is selecting 'a secure space in which one can be excessively melodramatic without suffering the consequences' (p. 87).

The second form of identification stressed by television theorists is not so much with characters and situations but with the process of viewing itself. This is particularly associated with soap opera where Brunson, for instance, had identified soap opera viewing as an active process which involved filling in the gaps of the programme by mapping out and judging the moral dilemmas at the heart of the stories. She associated this process with culturally constructed gender positions because it required the possession of 'traditionally feminine competencies associated with the responsibility for "managing" the sphere of personal life' (Brunson 1981: 36). The activity of viewing promoted 'informed speculation among the audience' (Geraghty 1981: 25) and the Tübingen Soap Opera Project team found 'in interviews over and over again ... that soap

opera texts are products not of individual and isolated reading but of collective constructions – collaborative readings ... of small social groups' (Seiter et al. 1991: 233).

This kind of active, social identification was also seen as characteristic of women's viewing of programmes other than soaps. Clark suggested that 'the "fierce identification" experienced by [*Cagney and Lacey*]'s female viewers may derive from their participation in and empowerment by the show's discursive strategies' (Clark 1990: 118); Dorothy Hobson noted more generally the way in which, in a female-dominated workplace, 'discussion of television programmes ... completes the process of communication' (Hobson 1990: 62) and the tendency of women in the workplace she studied to 'extend the conversation to discuss what they would do if they were in the same circumstances' (p. 64).

In presenting her work, Hobson is concerned to reveal the importance and value of talk which might otherwise be dismissed as gossip or 'having a laugh' (p. 61). The account of the way in which they work and talk is intended to reveal 'the way that women bring their feminine characteristics to their work situation' (p. 62). This desire to represent women's activities and attributes which have been constructed as particularly feminine in a more positive light is a key characteristic of feminist writing on female consumption and it is to this I wish to turn in the final section.

## Femininity and Consumption

I have traced out the different trajectories which have informed feminist work on film and television and which are now referred to, for instance, in the distinction between 'spectator' and 'viewer'. Nevertheless, this work of the 1970s and 1980s was being conducted in a common space defined by feminism, which meant that certain characteristics were shared even if, at some quite critical moments, these common features were somewhat submerged. This section will therefore look at some concepts which the different approaches to female consumption seem to share, concepts which offer possibilities and problems for both.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the debate on the meaning of women's consumption has been the turnabout in attitudes to traditional femininity and to texts which seem to call on femininity as the basis for pleasure. The developments in film theory which I have described above were crucial in shifting feminist theory away from a concern that Hollywood had presented only negative and demeaning stereotypes of women.<sup>4</sup> In both film and television studies, this break enabled a move away from 'images of women' to 'increased concentration on images for women' (Brunson 1991b: 365). In both cases, though in different ways, this allowed a shift from the notion that female characters operated as a model for women in the audience to a consideration of the broader processes through which femininity is constructed for and by women through such figures as the mother. This is not to say that the notion of a model disappeared. In some of the work on women's identification with female characters, concerns are at least implicitly expressed about the kind of example such characters were providing. On one hand, the model could

be one which emphasized female virtues of strength and resilience, commitment to friendship and sensitivity to the feelings of others. This figure is of importance, as we have seen, in work on *Cagney and Lacey* and soap opera's independent women. As a model it also implied its opposite, the negative image of feminine vices such as an over-reliance on men, a propensity for self-sacrifice to family needs and an over-investment in personal relationships. This notion of a negative image is one factor in the debates over the meaning of the mother in *Stella Dallas*. The continuance of this strand remains an important link between theoretical work and broader feminist activity about, for instance, women's access to the media.

Nevertheless, much of the feminist work I have described in both film and television has been concerned to rework this split between good and bad models and rethink it in terms of the fictional expression of women's position as it is constructed through contradictory demands inside and outside the text. What has emerged is not so much a notion of a textual point of view in the film studies tradition but a woman's viewpoint constructed through the textual conventions of narrative, camera work and style, and also through the pressures of femininity on the consumer brought to bear by a much wider set of experiences. In film studies, this was developed with some difficulty, but it seems to me that the notion of a woman's viewpoint lies behind the speed with which the theory of the male gaze was transformed into a puzzle about what women's position could be, the desire almost that it should be there; and the possibility of female positions based, in part at least, on the social experience of being mothers and/or daughters is at stake in Williams's debate with Kaplan over *Stella Dallas*; it is also asserted by Harper in her defence of Gainsborough melodramas. In television studies, the possibility of a woman's viewpoint was often expressed more overtly in, for instance, Clark's claim that 'the knowledge and experience they [women viewers] do have as women allows them to identify with discussions' (Clark 1990: 122) which *Cagney and Lacey* have about what decisions they should make; it lies also behind Ang's assessment of Sue Ellen's appeal to her viewers based on the expression of feminine, or indeed feminist, feelings of frustration.

This shift from what an image did to women to what women could do with women's images allowed for a more complex attitude to femininity; in this approach, the traditional feminine sphere of the private and domestic was recognized as being both culturally constructed and lived by women in different ways. It was also recognized that women's work in maintaining the emotional and physical fabric of domestic life was widely disparaged. Part of the task in film and television studies during the 1980s was, therefore, to assert the importance of women's emotional work and recognize the way in which women's genres, pre-eminently melodrama and soap opera, could give voice to their experiences. These genres did not just provide models for identification; they also allowed for expression of complex feelings about the tasks demanded of women in their social positions as mothers, wives, daughters, friends.

This was accompanied by a growing emphasis on giving women a voice not just through the text but as audience, a factor which can be seen in some 'ethnographic' work. Dorothy Hobson bases her article, 'Women Audiences

and the Workplace', on one woman's description of the viewing practices of women in her office. Hobson emphasizes her concern to let Jacqui's 'words predominate here because it is these women's experiences that she is relating - her narrative of their narratives within their working days' (Hobson 1990: 71). Jackie Stacey quotes extensively from the female film fans who responded to her questions and suggests that 'our understanding of female spectatorship' might 'be transformed by [their] accounts' (Stacey 1994: 9). In addition, feminist writers involved in such studies, while acknowledging their privileged position as academic researchers, have drawn on their own experiences of femininity to establish a level of 'identification' (Gray 1992: 34) with their women interviewees. Thus, Stacey begins her book *Star Gazing*, with an analysis of a photograph capturing her own teenage attempt to emulate Hollywood glamour. The Tübingen Soap Opera Project team, in reflecting on their interviews, felt that gender had provided a common ground which enabled their interviewees to share their experiences: 'If our identification as academics, foreigners and employers placed us in the category of "other", gender provided a position of "sameness" in relation to informants' (Seiter et al. 1991: 243). Ann Gray, discussing her working methods for interviewing women for *Video Playtime*, comments that she identified with some of the women whom she interviewed and considers that this 'shared position', based on similar experiences of being positioned through schooling, family and marriage as a feminine subject, was 'quite crucial to the quality of the conversations' she had (Gray 1992: 34).

This feminist approach of identifying in some way with female consumption, of seeking a shared position between audience and critic based on sharing the pressures and pleasures of 'we women' (Brunsdon 1991a: 124), has been important in the project of rescuing or, in Brunsdon's term, redeeming (p. 121) both feminine texts and the female audience. This has been reinforced by the emphasis on pleasure, on analysing but not condemning the pleasure available to female consumers of such texts. Mulvey's article was, it should be noted, about pleasure and it was precisely the question of women's pleasure (of what kind? in what? how?) which underpinned studies as different, for instance, as Doane's *The Desire to Desire* (1987) and Hobson's *Crossroads* (1982). As this work developed, the tendency has been to emphasize what is positive for women about their absorption in, for example, soap operas - as I do, for instance, in *Women and Soap Opera* (Geraghty 1991) - or in Hollywood melodramas - as Byars does in *All that Hollywood Allows* (1991). Absorption in consumption and the detachment implied by the act of choosing are thus presented not as opposites but as complex aspects of the pleasures of female consumption.

This emphasis on shared pleasures, on positive engagement by female consumers with texts and on the complexity of the female consumer's relationship with 'her' genres raises further questions, however, about how far it is possible in these postmodernist times to speak of positions and identities which are so strongly gendered. Throughout the writing I have described, one feels the tension between writing for and about the female consumer (as academic, as film lover, as soap opera fan) and maintaining an awareness of 'woman' as a

constructed position. The editors of *Revision* warned that 'an attempt to delineate a feminine specificity' ran the risk of 'a recapitulation of patriarchal constructions and a naturalisation of "woman"' (Doane et al. 1984: 9) while Julie D'Acci precisely tries to denaturalize the relationship between *Cagney and Lacey* and its fans by stressing the way in which 'several discourses and discursive practices ... construct a variety of interpretations of the characters; a general discourse of multiple definitions of 'woman' and 'femininity' as well as a woman's audience for the series' (D'Acci 1987: 203-4). A further dimension has been added with the development of work with audiences, with its apparent promise of the truth emerging out of the mouths of real women, of the Oregon viewers refuting Modleski's textual claims by refusing to stand in position. Ien Ang and Joke Hermes (1991) have queried how far gender can still function as a stable mark of difference on which understanding and pleasure can be predicated. In some senses, this recalls Cowie's insistence that gender cannot be fixed nor positions gendered; and, as Ann Gray has argued, it also undermines the intellectual and political drive in much of the work I have discussed to show the way in which gender differences and commonalities can form 'the basis of social critique' (Gray 1992: 31).

There is evidence that the links between film and television studies are being made and that new work on gender and consumption will develop from this. Jackie Byars's *All that Hollywood Allows* (1991), for example, criticizes the dominant Lacanian psychoanalytic approach in film studies and asserts the possibility of a female look; Jane Gaines (1990) has pointed to the denial of race and class as factors in film theories of spectatorship; Charlotte Brunson (1991a) has questioned the shift from text to audience characteristic of television studies while Jackie Stacey's *Star Gazing* (1994) adopts an audience-based approach in order to pursue her analysis of women fans' identification with female Hollywood stars. The outline I have been able to give has been limited, and much recent work has explored avenues which I have not addressed – the interest in constructions of masculinity and the male body, for instance, or in women's involvement in non-female genres such as horror films. In addition, the feminism which underpinned the work I have described has been challenged for its tendency to assume commonalities on the basis of gender and thus override other factors which construct identity. So far as future work is concerned, however, I will make only two points in conclusion. First, it seems important that future work should be able to hold on to the possibilities of change for women and that work on femininity should not fall into the trap of accepting its limitations. Second, there is surely a gender split in current work on female consumption. Ann Gray (1992) asked the women in her study to label domestic technology in shades of pink and blue, depending on who used it or controlled it. Not surprisingly, the washing machine tended to be pink and the VCR blue. Should we be more surprised to find that in media theory issues of consumption, audience and pleasure are relatively pink but work on media ownership, control and regulation is deepest indigo? It may be that in order to understand women's consumption fully women need to overcome their feminine technophobia and wrestle these toys also off the boys.

## Notes

- 1 These difficulties included two changes in actress for the character of Cagney and CBS's threat to cancel the show during its first series. For details, see D'Acci (1987) and (1994).
- 2 See Hurd (1984) for other essays on British films of the Second World War.
- 3 Psychoanalytically based work on television has of course continued. See, for instance, Mellencamp (1990) for examples of such work.
- 4 This is the approach adopted by Mollie Haskell (1975) and Marjorie Rosen (1973) in their discussion of Hollywood cinema.

## References

- ANG, I., 1990: 'Melodramatic Identifications: Television Fiction and Women's Fantasy', in M.E. Brown (ed.) *Television and Women's Culture*. London: Sage.
- ANG, I. and HERMES, J., 1991: 'Gender and/in Media Consumption', in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds.) *Mass Media and Society*. London: Edward Arnold.
- BRUNSDON, C., 1981: 'Crossroads: Notes on Soap Opera', *Screen*, 22 (4).
- BRUNSDON, C., 1991a: 'Text and Audience', in E. Seiter, H. Borchers, G. Kreutzner and E. Warth (eds.) *Remote Control*. London: Routledge.
- BRUNSDON, C., 1991b: 'Pedagogies of the Feminine: Feminist Teaching and Women's Genres', *Screen*, 32 (4).
- BYARS, J., 1991: *All that Hollywood Allows*. London: Routledge.
- CLARK, D., 1990: 'Cagney and Lacey: Feminist Strategies of Detection', in M.E. Brown (ed.) *Television and Women's Culture*. London: Sage.
- COOK, P., 1983: 'Melodrama and the Woman's Picture', in S. Aspinall and R. Murphy (eds.) *Gainsborough Melodramas*. London: British Film Institute.
- COWIE, E., 1988: 'The Popular Film as a Progressive Text. A Discussion of *Come*', in C. Penley (ed.) *Feminism and Film Theory*. London: British Film Institute/Routledge.
- D'ACCI, J., 1987: 'The Case of *Cagney and Lacey*', in H. Baher and G. Dyer (eds.) *Boxed In: Women and Television*. London: Pandora.
- D'ACCI, J., 1994: *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- DOANE, M., 1987: *The Desire to Desire*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- DOANE, M., 1989: untitled entry, *Camera Obscura*, 20/21.
- DOANE, M., 1990: 'Film and the Masquerade', in P. Erens (ed.) *Issues in Feminist Film Theory*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- DOANE, M., MELLENCAMP, P. and WILLIAMS, L. (eds.), 1984: *Revision Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. University Publications of America.
- GAINES, J., 1990: 'White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory', in P. Erens (ed.) *Issues in Feminist Film Theory*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- GERAGHTY, C., 1981: 'The Continuous Serial – a Definition' in R. Dyer (ed.) *Coronation Street*. London: British Film Institute.
- GERAGHTY, C., 1991: *Women and Soap Opera*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- GLEDHILL, C., 1984: 'Developments in Feminist Film Criticism', in M. Doane, P. Mellencamp and L. Williams (eds.) *Revision Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. University Publications of America.
- GRAY, A., 1992: *Video Playtime*. London: Routledge.
- HARPER, S., 1987: 'Historical Pleasures: Gainsborough Costume Melodrama', in C. Gledhill (ed.) *Home is Where the Heart is*. London: British Film Institute.



- HASKELL, M., 1975: *From Reverence to Rape: The treatment of women in the movies*. London: New English Library.
- HOBSON, D., 1982: 'Crossroads': *The Drama of a Soap Opera*. London: Methuen.
- HOBSON, D., 1990: 'Women Audiences and the Workplace', in M.E. Brown, (ed.) *Television and Women's Culture*. London: Sage.
- HURD, G. (ed.), 1984: *National Fictions*. London: British Film Institute.
- JOHNSTON, C., 1973: 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema', in C. Johnston (ed.) *Notes on Women's Cinema*. London: Society for Education in Film and Television.
- KAPLAN, E.A., 1987: 'Mothering, Feminism and Representation: The Maternal in Melodrama and the Woman's Film 1910-40', in C. Gledhill (ed.) *Home is Where the Heart is*. London: British Film Institute.
- KAPLAN, E.A., 1990: 'The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*', in P. Erens (ed.) *Issues in Feminist Film Theory*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- LA PLACE, M., 1987: 'Producing and Consuming the Woman's Film', in C. Gledhill (ed.) *Home is Where the Heart is*. London: British Film Institute.
- LOVELL, T., 1981: 'Ideology and *Coronation Street*', in R. Dyer (ed.) *Coronation Street*. London: British Film Institute.
- MELLENCAMP, P. (ed.), 1990: *Logics of Television*. London: British Film Institute.
- MODLESKI, T., 1984: *Loving with a Vengeance*. London: Methuen.
- MOORES, S., 1993: *Interpreting Audiences*. London: Sage.
- MORLEY, D., 1992: *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge.
- MULVEY, L., 1975: 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16 (2).
- PENLEY, C., 1988: *Feminism and Film Theory*. London: Routledge.
- ROSEN, M., 1973: *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream*. New York: Coward McCann & Geoghegan.
- SEITER, E., BORCHERS, H., KREUTZNER, G. and WARTH, E., 1991: "'Don't Treat Us Like We're so Stupid and Naive": Towards an Ethnography of Soap Opera Viewers', in E. Seiter, H. Brochers, G. Kreutzner and E. Warth (eds.) *Remote Control*. London: Routledge.
- SKIRROW, G., 1985: 'Widows', in M. Alvarado and J. Stewart (eds.) *Made for Television: Euston Films Limited*. London: British Film Institute.
- STACEY, J., 1994: *Star Gazing*. London: Routledge.
- WILLIAMS, L., 1987: "'Something else besides a mother" *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama', in C. Gledhill (ed.) *Home is Where the Heart is*. London: British Film Institute.

## 15

## Popular Culture and the Eroticization of Little Girls

*Valerie Walkerdine*

If studies of popular culture have largely ignored young children and studies of girls are limited to teenagers, the topic of popular portrayals of little girls as eroticized – little girls and sexuality – is an issue which touches on a number of very difficult, and often taboo areas. Feminism has had little to say about little girls, except through studies of socialization and sex-role stereotyping. With regard to sexuality, almost all attention has been focused on adult women. Little girls enter debates about women's memories of their own girlhood in the main: discussions of little girls' fantasies of sex with their fathers or adult men; as in Freud's Dora case, the debate surrounding Masson's claim that Freud had suppressed the evidence that many of his female patients had been sexually abused as children; and of course, the discourse of abuse itself. The topic of little girls and sexuality has come to be seen, then, as being about the problem of the sexual abuse of innocent and vulnerable girls by bad adult men, or conversely, less politically correct but no less present, the idea of little girls as little seductresses, who in the words of one judge in a child abuse case are 'no angel[s]'. I want to open up a set of issues that I believe are occluded by such debates. That is, in short, the ubiquitous eroticization of little girls in the popular media and the just as ubiquitous ignorance and denial of this phenomenon.

### Childhood Innocence and Little Lolitas

Janie is six. In the classroom she sits almost silently well behaved, the epitome of the hard-working girl, so often scorned as uninteresting in the educational literature on girls' attainment (Walkerdine 1989). She says very little and appears to be constantly aware of being watched and herself watches the model that she presents to her teacher and classmates, as well as to myself, seated in a corner of the classroom, making an audio recording. She always presents immaculate work and is used to getting very high marks. She asks to go to the toilet and leaves the classroom. As she is wearing a radio microphone