

these representations and the institutional practices of which they form part. It provokes, too, a consideration of the continuity between women's interpellation as spectators and their status as a social audience. In turn, the distinction between social audience and spectator/subject, and attempts to explore the relationship between the two, are part of a broader theoretical endeavour: to deal in tandem with texts and contexts. The distinction between social audience and spectator must also inform debates and practices around cultural production, in which questions of context and reception are always paramount. For anyone interested in feminist cultural politics, such considerations will necessarily inform any assessment of the place and the political usefulness of popular genres aimed at, and consumed by, mass audiences of women.

# 11

## Melodramatic Identifications: Television Fiction and Women's Fantasy

Ian Ang

**C**ONTEMPORARY POPULAR TELEVISION fiction offers an array of strong and independent female heroines, who seem to defy—without conflicts and contradictions, to be sure—stereotypical definitions of femininity. Heroines such as Maddie Hayes (*Moonlighting*) and Christine Cagney (*Cagney and Lacey*) do not fit into the traditional ways in which female characters have generally been represented in prime-time television fiction: passive and powerless on the one hand, and sexual objects for men on the other.

Christine Cagney, especially, and her partner Mary-Beth Lacey, are the kind of heroines who have mobilized approval from feminists.<sup>1</sup> *Cagney and Lacey* can be called a 'socialist realist' series, in which the personal and professional dilemmas of modern working women are dealt with in a serious and 'realistic' way. Cagney explicitly resists sexual objectification by her male colleagues, forcefully challenges the male hierarchy at work, and entertains an adult, respectful, and caring friendship with her 'buddy' Lacey.

Maddie Hayes is a little more difficult to evaluate in straightforward feminist terms. However, while she often has to cope with the all-but-abusive, but ever-so-magnetic machismo of her recalcitrant partner David Addison, *Moonlighting*, as a typical example of postmodernist television, self-consciously addresses, enacts, and acknowledges metonymically the pleasures and pains of the ongoing 'battle between the sexes' in the context of the series' characteristic penchant for hilarious absurdism and teasing parody.<sup>2</sup> In that battle, Maddie is neither passive nor always the loser: she fights and gains respect (and love) in the process.

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<sup>1</sup> See J. D'Acci, 'The Case of *Cagney and Lacey*', in H. Baehr and G. Dyer (eds.), *Boxed-In: Women and Television* (London: Pandora Press, 1987); also D. Clark, 'Cagney and Lacey: Feminist Strategies of Detection', in M. E. Brown (ed.), *Television and Women's Culture: The Politics of the Popular* (London: Sage, 1990), 116–33.

<sup>2</sup> See S. R. Olson, 'Meta-Television: Popular Postmodernism', *Cultural Studies in Mass Communication*, 4 (1987), 284–300.

Many women enjoy watching series such as *Cagney and Lacey* and *Moonlighting*, and it is likely that at least part of their pleasure is related to the 'positive' representations of women that both series offer. But this does not mean that other, more traditional television fictions are less pleasurable for large numbers of women. On the contrary, as is well known, soap operas have traditionally been the female television genre, while prime-time soaps such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* have always had a significantly larger female audience than a male one.

Personally, I have often been moved by Sue Ellen of *Dallas* as much as I am at times by Christine Cagney. And yet, Sue Ellen is a radically different heroine from Cagney: she displays no (will for) independence whatsoever, she derives her identity almost entirely from being the wife of the unscrupulous and power-obsessed J. R. Ewing, whom she detests because he is never faithful, but whom she does not have the strength to leave.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, Sue Ellen's life is dominated by constant frustration and suffering—apparently a very negative representation of 'woman' indeed. Despite this, the Sue Ellen character seems to be a source of identification and pleasure for many women viewers of *Dallas*: they seem not so much to love to hate J.R. but to suffer with Sue Ellen.

An indication of this can be derived from the results of a small-scale research that I conducted a few years ago.<sup>4</sup> Through an advertisement in a Dutch weekly magazine, I asked people to send me their views about *Dallas*. From the letters, it was clear that Sue Ellen stood out as a character whom many women viewers were emotionally involved with. One of the respondents wrote:

I can sit very happy and fascinated watching someone like Sue Ellen. That woman can really get round us, with her problems and troubles. She is really human. I could be someone like her too. In a manner of speaking.

Another wrote:

Sue Ellen is definitely my favourite. She has a psychologically believable character. As she is, I am myself to a lesser degree ('knocking one's head against a wall once too often') and I want to be (attractive).

It is interesting to note that another *Dallas* character whose structural position in the narrative is similar to Sue Ellen's has not elicited such committed responses at all. Pamela Ewing (married to J.R.'s brother, Bobby) is described rather blandly as 'a nice girl', or is seen as 'too sweet'. In fact, the difference of appeal between the two characters becomes even more pronounced in the light of the findings of a representative Dutch survey conducted in 1982 (around the time that the popularity of *Dallas* was at its height). While 21.7 per cent of female viewers between 15 and 39 years mentioned Sue Ellen as their favourite *Dallas* character (as against only 5.9 per

cent of the men), only 5.1 per cent named Pamela as their favourite (and 4.2 per cent of the men).<sup>5</sup>

Clearly Sue Ellen has a special significance for a large number of women viewers. Two things stand out in the quotes above. Not only do these viewers assert that the appeal of Sue Ellen is related to a form of realism (in the sense of psychological believability and recognizability); more importantly, this realism is connected with a somewhat tragic reading of Sue Ellen's life, emphasizing her problems and troubles. In other words, the position from which Sue Ellen fans seem to give meaning to, and derive pleasure from, their favourite *Dallas* character seems to be a rather melancholic and sentimental structure of feeling which stresses the down-side of life rather than its happy highlights; frustration, desperation, and anger rather than euphoria and cheerfulness.

To interpret this seemingly rather despondent form of female pleasure, I shall examine the position which the Sue Ellen character occupies in the *Dallas* narrative, and unravel the meaning of that position in the context of the specific fictional genre to which *Dallas* belongs: the melodramatic soap opera. The tragic structure of feeling embodied by Sue Ellen as a fictional figure must be understood in the context of the genre characteristics of the *Dallas* drama: just as Christine Cagney is a social-realist heroine and Maddie Hayes a postmodern one, so is Sue Ellen a melodramatic heroine. In other words, articulated and materialized in Sue Ellen's identity is what in 1976 American critic Peter Brooks called a melodramatic imagination.

Of course, fictional characters may be polysemic just as they can take on a plurality of meanings depending on the ways in which diverse viewers read them. Thus, Sue Ellen's melodramatic persona can be interpreted and evaluated in several ways. Whilst her fans tend to empathize with her and live through her problems and troubles vicariously, others stress her bitchiness and take a stance against her. In the words of one *Dallas* viewer:

Sue Ellen has had bad luck with J.R., but she makes up for it by being a flirt. I don't like her much. And she's too sharp-tongued.

Others have called her a frustrated lady. One of my respondents was especially harsh in her critique:

Take Sue Ellen. She acts as though she's very brave and can put up a fight, but she daren't make the step of divorce. What I mean is that in spite of her good intentions she lets people walk over her, because (as J.R. wants) for the outside world they have to form a perfect family.

According to Herta Herzog, who interviewed German viewers about *Dallas* in 1987, older viewers tend to see in Sue Ellen the woman ruined by her husband, while younger ones tend to see her as a somewhat unstable person who is her own problem.<sup>6</sup> However, despite the variation in emphasis in the different readings of Sue Ellen, a basic agreement seems to exist that her situation is an extremely contentious and frustrating one, and her

<sup>3</sup> At one point, Sue Ellen decided to become a businesswoman—and with great success. However, even this major structural change in her life was motivated by a wish to mess up J.R.'s schemes and plans. She started her business (Valentine Lingerie) as a shrewd tactic to get rid of J.R.'s mistress.

<sup>4</sup> See I. Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, trans. D. Couling (London and New York: Methuen, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> These figures come from a survey of the Department of Viewing and Listening Research, NOS, Hilversum, May 1982.

<sup>6</sup> See M. H. Herzog, 'Decoding *Dallas*: Comparing German and American Viewers', in A. A. Berger (ed.), *Television in Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987).

personality is rather tormented. This is the core of the melodramatic heroine. But while many viewers are put off by this type of character, some are fascinated, a response evoked not only by the dramatic content of the role, but by the melodramatic style of the actress, Linda Gray. As one fan discloses,

Sue Ellen (is) just *fantastic*, tremendous how that woman acts, the movements of her mouth, hands, etc. That woman really enters into her role, looking for love, snobbish, in short a real woman.

As a contrast, the same viewer describes Pamela as a Barbie doll with no feelings!

It is not my intention to offer an exhaustive analysis of the Sue Ellen character as melodramatic heroine. Nor do I want to make a sociological examination of which segment of the audience is attracted to characters like her. Rather, I use her as a point of departure to explore women's pleasure in popular fiction in general, and melodramatic fiction in particular. Women who use Sue Ellen as a source of identification while watching *Dallas* do that by taking up, in fantasy, a subject position which inhabits the melodramatic imagination.<sup>7</sup> The pleasure of such imaginary identification can be seen as a form of excess in some women's mode of experiencing everyday life in our culture: the act of surrendering to the melodramatic imagination may signify a recognition of the complexity and conflict fundamental to living in the modern world.

### Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination

I now move to summing up some of the structural soap opera characteristics of *Dallas* which contribute to its melodramatic content.<sup>8</sup> It should first be noted, however, that because *Dallas* is a prime-time programme, some of its features are different from those of the traditional daytime soaps. Most importantly, because the programme must attract a heterogeneous audience it will include a wider range of themes, scenes, and plots. For example, male characters, as well as themes, scenes, and plots which traditionally are mainly appreciated by male audiences, such as the wheelings and dealings of the oil business, and the cowboy/Western elements of the show, occupy a much more prominent place in the fictional world of *Dallas* than in regular daytime soap. Nevertheless, the general formal characteristics of *Dallas* do remain true to the soap opera genre, and are very important for the construction of melodramatic meanings and feelings in the text.<sup>9</sup>

First of all, as in all melodrama, personal life is the core problematic of the narrative. Personal life must be understood here as constituted by its every-

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted, however, that watching a television programme does not necessarily involve identification with only one character. On the contrary, numerous subject positions can be taken up by viewers while reading a television text. Consequently, a *Dallas* viewer may alternate between positions of identification and positions of distance, and thus inhabit several, sometimes contradictory imaginary structures at the same time.

<sup>8</sup> See R. C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> See Ang, *Watching Dallas*; J. Feuer, 'Enterprises: An Overview', in J. Feuer, P. Kerr, and T. Vahimagi (eds.), *MTM: 'Quality Television'* (London: BFI, 1984); also for melodrama in general see P. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976); C. Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart is* (London: BFI, 1987).

day realization through personal relationships. In soap operas, the evolution of personal relationships is marked out through the representation of significant family rituals and events such as births, romances, engagements, marriages, divorces, deaths, and so on. It is the experience of these rituals and events (and all the attendant complications and disputes) on which soap opera narratives centre. This does not imply that non-personal issues are not addressed. However the way in which they are treated and take on meaning is always from the standpoint of personal life:

the action of soap opera is not restricted to the familial, or quasi-familial institutions, but everything is told from the point of view of the personal.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, while J.R.'s business intrigues form a focal narrative concern in *Dallas*, they are always shown with an eye to their consequences for the well-being of the Ewing family members, not least his wife Sue Ellen.

A second major melodramatic feature of soap opera is its excessive plot structure. If family life is the main focus of the *Dallas* narrative, the life of the Ewings is presented as one replete with extraordinary conflicts and catastrophes. To the critical outsider this may appear as a purely sensationalist tendency to cliché and exaggeration—a common objection levelled at melodrama since the late nineteenth century. It is important to note, however, that *within* the fictional world of the soap opera all those extreme story-lines such as kidnappings, bribery, extramarital affairs, obscure illnesses, and so on, which succeed each other at such a breathtaking pace, are not treated in a sensational manner, but are taken entirely seriously.<sup>11</sup> The parameters of melodrama require that such clichés be regarded and assessed not for their literal, referential value—that is, their realism—but as meaningful in so far as they solicit a highly charged, emotional impact. Their role is metaphorical, and their appeal stems from the enlarged emotional impact they evoke: it is the feelings being mobilized here that matter. An excess of events and intensity of emotions are inextricably intertwined in the melodramatic imagination.

Sue Ellen's recurrent alcoholism is a case in point. Even though she has stayed away from alcohol for a long time loyal viewers are reminded of this dark side of her past every time she is shown refusing a drink. Do we detect a slight moment of hesitation there? Alcoholism is a very effective narrative motif that, in a condensed way, enables the devoted viewer to empathize with her feelings of desperation. She is married to a man she loathes but who has her almost completely in his power. In other words, Sue Ellen's propensity for alcoholism functions as a metaphor for her enduring state of crisis.

Such a state of crisis is not at all exceptional or uncommon in the context of the soap opera genre. On the contrary, crisis can be said to be endemic to it. As a result, Sue Ellen's predicament, as it is constructed, is basically

<sup>10</sup> C. Brundson, 'Crossroads: Notes on Soap Opera', *Screen*, 22/4 (1981), 34.

<sup>11</sup> The moment a soap opera becomes self-conscious about its own excess, which is sometimes the case with *Dynasty*, and no longer takes its own story seriously, it presents itself as a parody of the genre, as it were, accentuating its status as discourse through stylization and formalism (such as slow-motion techniques). Sections of the *Dynasty* audience that read the show as a form of camp, for instance, are responding to this aspect of the *Dynasty* text.

unsolvable unless she leaves the *Dallas* community and disappears from the serial altogether. Here, a third structural characteristic of the soap opera makes its impact: its lack of narrative progress. *Dallas*, like all soap operas, is a never-ending story: contrary to classic narratives, which are typically structured according to the logic of order/disorder/restoration of order, soap opera narratives never reach completion. They represent process without progression and as such do not offer the prospect of a conclusion of final denouement, in which all problems are solved. Thus, soap operas are fundamentally anti-utopian: an ending, happy or unhappy, is unimaginable. This does not mean, of course, that there are no moments of climax in soap operas. But, as Tania Modleski has observed, 'the "mini-climaxes" of soap opera function to introduce difficulties and to complicate rather than simplify the characters' lives'.<sup>12</sup> Here, a basic melodramatic idea is conveyed: the sense that life is marked by eternal contradiction, by unsolvable emotional and moral conflicts, by the ultimate impossibility, as it were, of reconciling desire and reality. As Laura Mulvey has put it,

The melodrama recognises this gap by raising problems, known and recognisable, and offering a personal escape similar to that of a day-dream: a chance to work through inescapable frustrations by positing an alternative ideal never seen as more than a momentary illusion.<sup>13</sup>

The life of the Sue Ellen character in *Dallas* exemplifies and dramatizes this melodramatic scenario. She even expresses an awareness of its painfully contradictory nature. In one dialogue with Pamela, for example, she states:

The difference [between you and me] is that you're a strong woman, Pam. I used to think I was, but I know differently now. I need Southfork. On my own, I don't amount to much. As much as I hate J.R., I really need to be Mrs J.R. Ewing. And I need him to be the father of John Ross [her son]. So I guess I just have to lead a married life without a husband.

In general then, it could be said that the soap operatic structure of *Dallas* opens up a narrative space in which melodramatic characters can come to life symbolically—characters who ultimately are constructed as victims of forces that lie beyond their control. A heroine like Sue Ellen will never be able to make her own history: no matter how hard she tries, eventually the force of circumstances will be too overwhelming. She lives in the prison of an eternally conflictual present. No wonder that she reacts with frustration, bitterness, resignation, and cynical ruthlessness on the rebound. As she neatly summarizes her own life philosophy:

If J.R. seeks sex and affection somewhere else, so why shouldn't I? All Ewing men are the same. And for you to survive you have two choices. You can either get out, or you can play by their rules!

In fact, this frame of mind has led her to give up all attempts to find true happiness for herself: although she has her occasional moments of joy (a new

12 T. Modleski, 'The Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work', in E. A. Kaplan (ed.), *Regarding Television* (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1983), 107.

13 L. Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama', *Movie*, 25 (1978), 30.

lover, for example), they are futile in the face of her biggest self-imposed passion: to use all the power she has to undermine J.R.'s projects, to ruin his life just as he has ruined hers. She even refuses him a divorce to keep him from marrying another woman (by which he expects to win an extremely advantageous business deal). It is such small victories which make her feel strong at times. But they are ultimately self-destructive and will never allow her to break out of her cage.

Against this background, identifying with Sue Ellen implies a recognition of the fact that Sue Ellen's crisis is a permanent one: there seems to be no real way out. She may experience happy moments, but as viewers we know that those moments are bound to be merely temporary and inevitably followed by new problems and difficulties. At stake, then, must be a rather curious form of pleasure for these viewers. Whereas in other narratives pleasure comes from the assurance and confirmation of a happy end—as with the romantic union of a man and a woman in the formulaic 'they live happily ever after', involvement with a character like Sue Ellen is conditioned by the prior knowledge that no such happy ending will ever occur. Instead, pleasure must come from living through and negotiating with the crisis itself. To put it more precisely, many female Sue Ellen fans tend to identify with a subject position characterized by a sense of entrapment: a sense in which survival is, in the words of television critic Horace Newcomb, 'complicated by ambiguity and blurred with pain even in its most sought-after moments'.<sup>14</sup>

If this is true (and I have already given some indications that this is indeed the case) how do we interpret this kind of identification, this form of pleasure in popular fiction?

### Pleasure, Fantasy, and the Negotiation of Femininity

One could assert that melodramatic heroines like Sue Ellen should be evaluated negatively because they attest to an outlook on life that stresses resignation and despair. Isn't the melodramatic imagination a particularly damaging way of making sense of life because it affirms tendencies of individualistic fatalism and pessimism? And isn't such an impact especially harmful for women as it reinforces and legitimizes masochistic feelings of powerlessness? Wouldn't it be much better for women and girls to choose identification figures that represent strong, powerful, and independent women who are able and determined to change and improve their lives, such as Christine Cagney?

Such concerns are, of course, often heard in feminist accounts of popular fiction, but it is important to note here that they are often based upon a theoretical approach—what could be called a role/image approach, or more conventionally, 'images of women' approach—which analyses images of women in the media and in fiction by setting them against real women. Fictional female heroines are then seen as images of women functioning as role models for female audiences.<sup>15</sup> From such a perspective, it is only logical

14 H. Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), 178.

15 T. Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1986); L. F. Rakow, 'Feminist Approaches to Popular Culture: Giving Patriarchy its Due', *Communication*, 9 (1986), 19–41.

to claim that one should strive to offer positive role models by supplying positive images of women. And from this perspective, feminist common sense would undoubtedly ascribe the Sue Ellen character to the realm of negative images, reflecting a traditional, stereotyped, or trivialized model of womanhood.

However, this approach contains both theoretical and political problems. Most importantly here, because it implies a rationalistic view of the relationship between image and viewer (whereby it is assumed that the image is seen by the viewer as a more or less adequate model of reality), it can only account for the popularity of soap operas among women as something irrational. In other words, what the role/image approach tends to overlook is the large *emotional involvement* which is invested in identification with characters of popular fiction.

To counteract this attitude, we first of all need to acknowledge that these characters are products of *fiction*, and that fiction is not a mere set of images to be read referentially, but an ensemble of textual devices for engaging the viewer at the level of fantasy.<sup>16</sup> As a result, female fictional characters such as Sue Ellen Ewing or Christine Cagney cannot be conceptualized as realistic images of women, but as textual constructions of possible *modes of femininity*: as embodying versions of gendered subjectivity endowed with specific forms of psychological and emotional satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and specific ways of dealing with conflicts and dilemmas. In relation to this, they do not function as role models but are symbolic realizations of feminine subject positions with which viewers can identify *in fantasy*.

Fantasy is central here. In line with psychoanalytic theory, fantasy should not be seen as mere illusion, an unreality, but as a reality in itself, a fundamental aspect of human existence: a necessary and unerasable dimension of psychological reality. Fantasy is an imagined scene in which the fantasizing subject is the protagonist, and in which alternative scenarios for the subject's real life are evoked. Fantasizing obviously affords the subject pleasure, which, according to the psychoanalysts, has to do with the fulfilment of a conscious or unconscious wish. Here I would suggest more generally that the pleasure of fantasy lies in its offering the subject an opportunity to take up positions which she could not do in real life: through fantasy she can move beyond the structural constraints of everyday life and explore other situations, other identities, other lives. It is totally unimportant here whether these are realistic or not. As Lesley Stern has remarked, 'gratification is to be achieved not through acting out the fantasies, but through the activity of fantasising itself'.<sup>17</sup>

Fantasies, and the act of fantasizing, are usually a private practice in which we can engage at any time and the content of which we generally keep to ourselves. Fictions, on the other hand, are collective and public fantasies; they are textual elaborations, in narrative form, of fantastic scenarios which,

16 V. Walkerdine, 'Some Day my Prince will Come: Young Girls and the Preparation for Adolescent Sexuality', in A. McRobbie and M. Nava (eds.), *Gender and Generation* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 168. See also E. Cowie, 'Fantasia', *m/f* 9 (1984), 71–105; C. Kaplan, 'The Thornbirds: Fiction, Fantasy, Femininity', in V. Burgin, J. Donald, and C. Kaplan (eds.), *Formations of Fantasy* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986).

17 L. Stern, 'The Body as Evidence', *Screen*, 23/5 (1982), 56.

being mass-produced, are offered ready-made to audiences. We are not the originators of the public fantasies offered to us in fiction. This explains, of course, why we are not attracted to all the fictions available to us: most of them are irrelevant. Despite this, the pleasure of consuming fictions that do attract us may still relate to that of fantasy: that is, it still involves the imaginary occupation of other subject positions which are outside the scope of our everyday social and cultural identities.

Implicit in the theoretical perspective I have outlined so far is a post-structuralist theory on subjectivity.<sup>18</sup> Central to this is the idea that subjectivity is not the essence or the source from which the individual acts and thinks and feels; on the contrary, subjectivity should be seen as a product of the society and culture in which we live: it is through the meaning systems or discourses circulating in society and culture that subjectivity is constituted and individual identities are formed. Each individual is the site of a multiplicity of subject positions proposed to her by the discourses with which she is confronted; her identity is the precarious and contradictory result of the specific set of subject positions she inhabits at any moment in history.

Just as the fictional character is not a unitary image of womanhood, then, so is the individual viewer not a person whose identity is something static and coherent. If a woman is a social subject whose identity is at least partially marked out by her being a person of a certain sex, it is by no means certain that she will always inhabit the same mode of feminine subjectivity. On the contrary, many different and sometimes contradictory sets of femininities or feminine subject positions (ways of being a woman) are in principle available to her, although it is likely that she will be drawn to adopt some of those more than others. Certain modes of femininity are culturally more legitimate than others; and every woman knows subject positions she is best able to handle. This does not mean, however, that her identity as a woman is something determined in the process of socialization. On the contrary, the adoption of a feminine subjectivity is never definitive but always partial and shaky: in other words, being a woman implies a never-ending *process* of becoming a feminine subject: no one subject position can ever cover satisfactorily all the problems and desires an individual woman encounters.

All too often women (and men too, of course, but their relationship to constructions of masculinity is not at issue here) have to negotiate in all sorts of situations in their lives—at home, at work, in relationships, in larger social settings. In this women are constantly confronted with the cultural task of finding out what it means to be a woman, of marking out the boundaries between the feminine and the unfeminine. This task is not a simple one, especially in the case of modern societies where cultural rules and roles are no longer imposed authoritatively, but allow individualistic notions such as autonomy, personal choice, will, responsibility, and rationality. In this context, a framework of living has been created in which every individual woman is faced with the task of actively reinventing and redefining her femininity as required. The emergence of the modern feminist movement has intensified this situation: now women have become much more conscious about their position in society, and consequently are encouraged to take

18 See C. Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

control over their own lives by rejecting the traditional dictum that anatomy is destiny. Being a woman, in other words, can now mean the adoption of many different identities, composed of a whole range of subject positions, not predetermined by immovable definitions of femininity. It would stretch beyond the purpose of this article to explore and explain in more detail how women construct and reconstruct their feminine identities in everyday life. What is important to conclude at this point then is that being a woman involves *work*, work of constant self-(re)construction. (The ever-growing array of different women's magazines is a case in point: in all of them the central problematic is 'how to be a true woman', while the meanings of 'true' are subject to constant negotiation.) At the same time, however, the energy women must put in this fundamental work of self-(re)construction is suppressed: women are expected to find the right identity effortlessly. (Women's magazines always assume an enthusiastic, 'you-can-do-it!' mode of address: work is represented as pleasure.)

It is in this constellation that fantasy and fiction can play a distinctive role. They offer a private and unconstrained space in which socially impossible or unacceptable subject positions, or those which are in some way too dangerous or too risky to be acted out in real life, can be adopted. In real life, the choice for this or that subject position is never without consequences. Contrary to what women's magazines tell us, it is often *not* easy to know what it means to be a 'true' woman. For example, the social display of forms of traditional femininity—dependence, passivity, submissiveness—can have quite detrimental and self-destructive consequences for women when strength, independence, or decisiveness are called for. In fantasy and fiction, however, there is no punishment for whatever identity one takes up, no matter how headstrong or destructive: there will be no retribution, no defeat will ensue. Fantasy and fiction then, are the safe spaces of excess in the interstices of ordered social life where one has to keep oneself strategically under control.

From this perspective identification with melodramatic heroines can be viewed in a new way. The position ascribed to Sue Ellen by those identifying with her is one of masochism and powerlessness: a self-destructive mode of femininity which, in social and political terms, could only be rejected as regressive and unproductive. But rather than condemn this identification, it is possible to observe the gratification such imaginary subject positions provide for the women concerned. What can be so pleasurable in imagining a fantastic scenario in which one is a self-destructive and frustrated bitch?

In the context of the discussion above, I can suggest two meanings of melodramatic identifications. On the one hand, sentimental and melancholic feelings of masochism and powerlessness, which are the core of the melodramatic imagination, are an implicit recognition, in their surrender to some power outside the subject, of the fact that one can never have everything under control all the time, and that consequently identity is not a question of free and conscious choice but always acquires its shape under circumstances not of one's own making. Identification with these feelings is connected with a basic, if not articulated, awareness of the weighty pressure of reality on one's subjectivity, one's wishes, one's desires. On the other hand, identification with a melodramatic character like Sue Ellen also vali-

dates those feelings by offering women some room to indulge in them, to let go as it were, in a moment of intense, self-centred abandon—a moment of giving up to the force of circumstances, just like Sue Ellen has done, so that the work of self-(re)construction is no longer needed. I would argue that such moments, however fleeting, can be experienced as moments of peace, of truth, of redemption, a moment in which the complexity of the task of being a woman is fully realized and accepted. In short, whilst indulgence in a melodramatic identity in real life will generally only signify pathetic weakness and may have paralysing effects, fantasy and fiction constitute a secure space in which one can be excessively melodramatic without suffering the consequences. No wonder melodrama is often accompanied with tears.

### Final Remarks

This interpretation of the appeal of melodramatic characters among women must, of course, be contextualized and refined in several ways. First of all, by trying to explain what it means for women to identify with a melodramatic fictional character, I have by no means intended to justify or endorse it. I have tried to make it understandable, in the face of the ridicule and rejection that crying over melodramatic fiction (as if it were irrational) continues to receive. However, my analysis does not extend to any further impact upon the subjects concerned. Whether the release of melodramatic feelings through fantasy or fiction has an empowering or paralysing effect upon the subject is an open question and can probably not be answered without analysing the context of the fantasizing.

Secondly, we should not overlook the fact that not all women are attracted to melodrama, and that some men can be moved by melodrama too. If anything, this fact suggests that femininity and masculinity are not positions inhabited inevitably by biological women and men, but that identity is transitory, the temporary result of dynamic identifications. Further research and analysis could give us more insight into the conditions, social, cultural, psychological, under which a surrender to the melodramatic imagination exerts its greatest appeal. Melodrama has been consistently popular among women in the modern period, but this does not have to be explained exclusively in terms of constants. The fundamental chasm between desire and reality, which forms the deepest 'truth' of the melodramatic imagination, may be an eternal aspect of female experience, but how that chasm is bridged symbolically and in practice is historically variable. In fact, there is a fundamentally melodramatic edge to feminism too. After all, are not the suffering and frustration so eminently materialized in melodramatic heroines the basis for the anger conveyed in feminism? And does not feminism stand for the overwhelming desire to transcend reality—which is bound to be a struggle, full of frustrations and moments of despair? While the melodramatic heroine is someone who is forced to give up, leaving a yawning gap between desire and reality, the feminist is someone who refuses to give up, no matter how hard the struggle to close that gap might be.

Christine Cagney, too, shares more with Sue Ellen than we might expect. Of course, the manifest dramatic content of *Cagney and Lacey* is more in line with feminist ideals and concerns, and as such the Cagney and Lacey

characters can provide an outlet for identification with fantasies of liberation for women viewers.<sup>19</sup> Despite the fact that Christine Cagney is an independent career woman who knows where she stands, she too must at times face the unsolvable dilemmas inherent in the lives of modern women: how to combine love and work; how to compete with the boys; how to deal with growing older . . . Often enough, she encounters frustration and displays a kind of cynical bitchiness not unlike Sue Ellen's. I would argue that some of the most moving moments of *Cagney and Lacey* are those in which Cagney gives in to the sense of powerlessness so characteristic of the melodramatic heroine.

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# Black Feminism and Media Criticism: *The Women of Brewster Place*

Jacqueline Bobo and Ellen Seiter

**T**HAT BLACK WOMEN are writing and talking about their history, their politics, and their socio-economic status is not a recent occurrence, though it has sometimes been treated as if it is a 1980s phenomenon. Hazel Carby, in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, documents the fact that black women have long used the mechanisms available to them to attain a 'public voice'. Whether in writing, public speaking, or establishing national networks among a wide spectrum of black women, black feminists have worked diligently to comment upon and improve their social condition.<sup>1</sup> Other recent research by black women has recovered a wealth of literary and political work written by black women and used this as the basis for formalizing a body of thought concerning black feminist theory.<sup>2</sup> This archaeological work was necessary, notes Valerie Smith, because black women had been structured out of the writings of others.<sup>3</sup> The consequences of this neglect were that black women were misrepresented in the theoretical writings of others, if not omitted entirely. For cultural critics this was a particularly vexing problem, in that one of its consequences has been a limited access to works created by black women: now, however, the groundwork has been laid by literary scholars for an analysis of a range of cultural products. No longer can a text constructed by a black woman be considered in isolation from the context of its creation, from its connection with other works within the tradition of black women's creativity, and from its impact not just on cultural critics but on cultural consumers. As we witness the aggressive move towards

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- 1 Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987).
- 2 Examples are Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition 1892–1976* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980); Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860–1960* (New York: Anchor Press, 1987); and more recent essays about black feminist theory in Cheryl Wall (ed.), *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1989); and Joanne Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin (eds.), *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1990).
- 3 Valerie Smith, 'Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the "Other"', in Cheryl A. Wall (ed.), *Changing Our Own Words*, 38–57; 'Gender and Afro-Americanist Literary Theory and Criticism', in Elaine Showalter (ed.), *Speaking of Gender* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1989), 56–70.

<sup>19</sup> G. Dyer, 'Women and Television: An Overview', in H. Baehr and G. Dyer (eds.), *Boxed-In: Women and Television* (London: Pandora Press, 1987), 10.