

OXFORD READINGS



IN FEMINISM

**FEMINISM**  
& **CULTURAL**  
**STUDIES**

**Morag Shiach**

OXFORD READINGS IN FEMINISM

# Feminism and Cultural Studies

Edited by

**Morag Shiach**

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OXFORD READINGS IN FEMINISM

**FEMINISM AND CULTURAL STUDIES**

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## Introduction

'Cultural studies' is an interdisciplinary space whose contours and energies express the complex and shifting relations between cultural analysis and political critique over the last thirty years. It is a field which has grown rapidly in recent years and has developed from the concerns, methodologies, and analytic procedures of a number of disciplines, including literature, sociology, anthropology, film studies, and philosophy.

There is no single story of cultural studies. For an editor of a volume such as this one that fact may be a source of disappointment, even of frustration. Certainly it does seem to have been the aim of many editors of recent volumes on cultural studies to construct a narrative of the true nature and appropriate objects of the field. This desire to fix the discipline, to give it an authoritative source and a simple trajectory, risks distorting the various ways in which the analysis of culture has involved, intrigued, and excited people over the last thirty years.

Cultural studies is marked by the different national contexts in which it has developed. Factors including the forms and languages of politics, the relations between cultural production and the state, or the organization and funding of education will all leave their trace on the kind of work done in the field. For example, the political and cultural meanings of race and ethnicity are a central concern of cultural studies as a whole, but the theoretical terms in which these aspects are understood have been quite varied and can only be interpreted in relation to the different colonial histories of, for example, Britain, Australia, and the United States.

The growth of cultural studies as an academic field also expresses the scale, and the contested nature, of educational changes in recent years. In Britain, for example, cultural studies developed largely in polytechnics and in adult and continuing education. For a number of reasons, these were intellectual spaces where interdisciplinary work could more readily be undertaken. Polytechnics had less of an investment in the sanctity of existing academic disciplines because they had less of a stake in the cultural hierarchies that supported them. They were also addressing a constituency of students who were much more varied in terms of age

and of class than was typical in universities in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, modular degree structures which were common in polytechnics made the process of disciplinary change both intellectually and institutionally more conceivable since new work could be understood as additional or optional rather than being seen as a threatening replacement of existing academic and cultural concerns. In recent years the forms of division within British higher education have been substantially modified, and cultural studies has entered many of the old universities, often at postgraduate level. None the less, cultural studies is marked by its particular institutional history, with opponents still fearful that it is tainted by the vocational.

In other national contexts, too, cultural studies reveals the traces of broader social transformations. These include the processes through which existing cultural hierarchies are challenged, and the ways in which the centrality and significance of particular texts and artefacts are contested by groups who feel excluded or threatened by them. This might also involve the revision of academic syllabuses and the broadening of the constituency who have access to higher education. Indeed, cultural studies is often understood as the cause of such changes, which are felt to be negative in their impact and threatening in their scope. Thus, for example, hostility to cultural studies in the United States has started from the assumption that it has caused what is seen as the damaging interest in non-canonical forms of culture. This fearful response may be understandable, since both social and cultural power are at stake, but as an account of the development of cultural studies it is reductive to the point of redundancy.

As an intellectual and academic space marked by its interdisciplinarity, cultural studies risks being understood as amorphous, as lacking in rigour. In fact, the challenge of interdisciplinarity often leads to greater rigour in terms of theoretical definition and methodological self-consciousness. Far from assuming that 'anything goes', cultural studies often proceeds on the assumption that absolutely everything needs to be theoretically grounded. This requires familiarity with a very broad range of theoretical discourses. In their discussion of Australian cultural studies, for example, John Frow and Meaghan Morris suggest something of the variety of theoretical and cultural material which might need to be employed to understand the everyday cultural phenomenon that is the shopping mall.<sup>1</sup> This would include an economic discourse which can address the retailing of commodities, an aesthetic discourse related to architecture and space, political discourses concerned with property and with the politics of bodies in space, discourses con-

cerned with the construction and significance of gender, accounts of the history of consumerism, and analyses of the mall as textual construct.

Cultural studies has always been concerned with the relations between forms of culture and forms of power. Culture has been understood in a number of different ways: as specific texts; as the practices which construct national, class, or gender identities; or as the interconnection of different modes and systems of communication. But each of these understandings has led to analyses which aim to capture the ways in which culture interacts with social inequalities. Thus the focus of analysis might be the ways in which particular subcultural groups use and modify cultural artefacts, or it might be the ways in which a particular film constructs its audience, or it might be the ways in which different cultural forms interact at a given historical moment. Overall, however, cultural studies is interested in the practices and texts through which individuals and groups come to understand or to imagine themselves as social beings.

It might, then, be tempting to imagine that feminism and cultural studies have always been intimately connected. Feminist theories and forms of activism have long been addressing the ways in which culture constructs or reinforces gender hierarchies. In many disciplinary and political spaces feminism has concerned itself with forms of language, with the power of images, with the pleasures and perils of cultural identifications. Yet in all the disciplinary self-consciousness which has characterized cultural studies, its relation to feminism has been strikingly tangential. Despite the quality and range of feminist work in this area, histories of cultural studies mention only founding fathers and anthologies give to feminism only a minor supporting role. Charlotte Brunsdon has written forcefully about the particular difficulties of developing gendered intellectual work within the field of cultural studies.<sup>2</sup> Her article on the challenges facing feminist scholars begins: 'It was a truth acknowledged by all women studying at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in the 1970s that no woman there had ever completed a PhD.' In exploring the impact of this perceived incompatibility between the demands of feminist research and of postgraduate work in cultural studies Brunsdon discusses the ways in which feminist questioning of the priorities and the methodologies of cultural studies generated both hostility and incomprehension. Hostility and incomprehension have perhaps given way to a rather anxious indifference, but feminist work remains awkwardly placed in terms of disciplinary definitions and received histories.

The marginalization of feminist practice in disciplinary, institutional, and political histories is not, of course, confined to cultural studies. The risks of 'forgetting' seem strong in relation to many aspects of feminist practice. The aim of this anthology is to counteract this tendency towards amnesia and to register the power and range of work by feminist critics working within cultural studies over the last twenty years. Narrating the history of cultural studies often takes the form of unseemly struggles over its real nature, its proper parentage, its authentic identity. By addressing feminism and cultural studies, however, it is possible to avoid the lures of the more familiar founding narratives. Feminist critics have never had the luxury of belonging, of feeling central, so that their work tends to stress the exploratory and the partial nature of the theoretical models on which cultural studies draws. Feminist critics are often particularly conscious of the difficulties of describing or constructing collectivity and they are wary of the rhetorical gesture of inclusion which leaves many outside crucial theoretical and political categories. Their commitment to interdisciplinarity, which often reflects the joint experiences of working within women's studies and cultural studies, draws on the interaction of diverse spaces and provides polemical energy as well as theoretical innovation.

Feminist critics are also frequently concerned to understand the historical development of cultural forms and to explore the ways in which gender and culture interacted at different historical moments. Cultural studies has tended to focus on contemporary cultural forms. Indeed, in a recent article Simon During defines cultural studies as 'the study of *contemporary* culture'.<sup>3</sup> This emphasis on the contemporary expresses the particular interests of cultural studies in the social and political impact of commodification and of mass production as definitive of the experience of the modern. Yet it seems important not to reduce the understanding of modernity to an understanding of the contemporary: modernity has a long and important history. It is a strength of much feminist research in the field of cultural studies that it seeks to develop a historical understanding of cultural forms and experiences, often as a means to suggest the possibility of change, to feed the utopian imagination.

This anthology is arranged thematically, and in each part there is work from different historical periods and different national contexts. The five parts, Consuming and Commodities; Working; The Age of Mechanical Reproduction; Fantasies of Desire; and Home?, each represent central areas of concern for feminist critics working within cultural studies. The interest in consumption and the social circulation of com-

modities reflects a number of aspects of the field. The growth in mass production of commodities from the late nineteenth century and the consequent development of new forms of advertising and marketing have been seen as key social determinants of the development of cultural studies. For many writers and cultural critics in the early years of this century the growth of consumerism represented a threat to art, to traditional forms of community, and to the integrity of the individual self. Cultural studies may be seen as a reaction to such pessimism, seeking as it did to understand the possible relations between resistance to social hierarchies and practices of consumption. For feminist critics there was a particular need to understand these issues because the act of consuming was a cultural and social practice that seemed of particular importance to women. In addition, feminist interest in practices of consumption expressed a desire to challenge the dominance of research paradigms which linked the public with the political. Understanding the ways in which consumption can constitute oppositional identities and offer subversive pleasures might provide the terms for understanding more local or private forms of political engagement.

Meaghan Morris and Mica Nava both explore the possible relations between buying and power. Morris develops a complex account, which is framed by anthropological, social, and literary theories, of the ways in which shopping centres might reconfigure the sense of place and identity for the contemporary consumer. Angela McRobbie is also concerned with the construction of identities, exploring the negotiated, self-conscious, and parodic forms of identity constructed through youth cultures of dance. Kirsten Drotner's interest is to analyse the terms in which such identities could be constructed in the nineteenth century: she explores the ways in which forms of popular publishing offered new possibilities, which were yet constricted possibilities, for the young female consumer. Ann duCille is interested in the challenge of ever more refined forms of marketing difference, suggesting that the commodification of difference may be disabling in its illusions of choice. Finally, Patricia J. Williams offers a rather sobering anecdote which suggests the forms of exclusion which underpin the cultural and social elevation of shopping.

Analysis of work has not always been seen as central to feminist research in cultural studies; indeed, much early writing turned away in frustration from the very limited and gendered social categories which elevated paid work to the status of engine of liberation. The research in this part probably exhibits the greatest methodological diversity, reflecting the difficulty that feminist theorists have found in intervening in the



disciplinary spaces of labour and cultural history. None the less, reading the work of historians such as Catherine Hall and Sally Alexander, alongside work by Dorothy Hobson and Christine Griffin, does reveal some very interesting insights into the ways in which women come to understand themselves as workers and into how they understand narratives of class, gender, and race in relation to each other. Patricia Mellenkamp also seeks to understand the processes and narratives which connect economic relations and cultural forms, though her interest is specifically in the experience of late capitalism.

Mechanical reproduction and its cultural effects has, on the other hand, long been of interest to cultural studies: television, both as a technology and as a cultural form, has been crucial to the sense of the particularity of post-Second World War culture. In the third part, work on television, on film, and on photography has been chosen to suggest the specific questions that emerge from feminist questioning of the experiences of mass-produced forms of culture. Both Claire Johnston and Jackie Stacey, though writing in different periods and different contexts, explore the ways in which popular cinema constructs and yet might subvert the stability of sexual difference. Jacqueline Bobo's work seeks to understand this tension between the reproduction of existing structures of power and the pleasures of imagining new identities in a study of the ways in which black women viewed *The Color Purple*. Christine Geraghty's study of prime-time soap opera is also interested in contested identities and private pleasures. Laura Mulvey and Judith Williamson write about the cultural meanings and resources of photography: Williamson explores the familial meanings of photography while Mulvey writes about the ways in which the artist Cindy Sherman uses photography as a resource for the construction of ironic identities. Finally, Charlotte Brunson considers the pedagogical challenges of engaging with the culture of the everyday and considers in particular the problems of asking students to engage with the pleasures and the perils of femininity.

Much work in feminist cultural studies has been concerned with the ways in which cultural representations structure the meaning of sexuality and with the way in which they mobilize unconscious fears or desires to produce compelling forms of pleasure. Alison Light and Janice Radway both examine a particular cultural form, romance fiction, which has been associated overwhelmingly with women. They are keen to challenge the assumption that readers of romance are dupes and victims who passively or masochistically consume narratives of their own patriarchal confinement. Clare Whatling and Elspeth Probyn extend these