Gendering the Reader

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Introduction

GENERAL AIMS OF THE BOOK

This book aims to analyse the difficult relationship between gender and reading/viewing/listening.[1] Gendering the Reader is a series of essays which constitute feminist analyses of the way that texts address readers, and the way that readers adopt, or are directed towards, positions in relation to texts. It is concerned with the power of the reader in the production of meaning: to what extent s/he can resist the dominant address of the text and adopt and/or construct alternative reading positions. We are particularly concerned with the analysis of the way that texts gender their readership, but recognise the necessity not to resort to a simple binary female/male analysis; we examine the differences within the term 'gender' (that is, differences of race, age, class, sexual orientation, knowledge base/ education, occupation and so on). We are not therefore concerned here with producing a simple analysis of the way that all women or all men read, but rather with examining the way that we as women are sometimes described and addressed as if we were the same, at the same time being mindful of the heterogeneity lurking behind that problematic term 'woman'. As many feminist theorists have shown, the term 'woman' needs to be used to describe oppression, at the same time as its unified nature needs to be called into question (see Fuss 1989; Butler 1990). Theorists such as Monique Wittig have drawn attention to the fact that the terms 'woman' and even 'women' are used to refer to women within heterosexual relations; in order to theorise the gender identity of lesbians, a different term or frame of reference is necessary (Wittig 1992). Many Black feminist theorists have also noted the way that 'woman' tends to be used to refer only to white women in feminist theoretical work, whilst masquerading as a more generic reference (see Feminist Review, no. 31). Indeed, it is significant that developments in theories of how gender is implicated in

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the reading process have depended on a changing view of the gendered subject. The post-1980s feminist assault on essentialism has effectively destroyed our ability to talk unproblematically of 'the woman reader' or 'the woman's text'. But as Modleski states: 'It seems more important to struggle over what it *means* to be a woman than whether or not to be one' (Modleski 1991: 20). Most of us still retain a common-sense belief in the existence of 'women' because we are constantly categorised as such, but it has become much harder as a feminist critic to write about this in a manageable or theoretically stimulating way. What seems important for us is that in widening our focus from an unproblematised notion of 'woman' we do not then go on to slip into the potentially apolitical position which certain approaches to gender seem to encourage, as Modleski states in a critique of certain types of gender studies: 'feminism in this formulation is a conduit to the more comprehensive field of gender studies; no longer is the latter judged . . . according to the contributions it can make to the feminist project' (Modleski 1991: 5). We feel strongly that it is possible to work within gender studies and still produce analyses which will contribute to feminism as a whole. It is clear that radical anti-essentialist positions may lead to the use of the term 'woman', no matter how hedged around with modifications, being disallowed. What many feminist theorists fear is that this type of deconstructive move can lead towards a 'refusal to accept responsibility for one's implication in actual historical or social relations or a denial that positionalities exist or that they matter, the denial of one's own personal history and the claim to a total separation from it' (Martin and Mohanty, cited by Modleski 1991: 19). This debate about gender positionality informs all of the essays in this collection.

The question of the role of the reader in discovering or creating a meaning for a text is one which has been debated by linguists and literary/cultural theorists for a number of years.[2] Most of this debate has been conducted without interdisciplinary cross-over, and therefore these essays contribute significantly to the field by analysing the positioning of the reader from an interdisciplinary perspective, combining the benefits of both feminist linguistic and literary/cultural theoretical models. It is our aim to develop particular problematics which arise when positioning is seen from this combined viewpoint. Much linguistic work has attempted to consider the way that the language of a text cues responses in the reader; this work is invaluable for anchoring some of the more general theoretical debates which have been raging in literary circles about the positioning of the reader (Fowler *et al.* 1979; Fairclough 1989). However, some of this work simply assumes that all readers will necessarily decode these traces in the text in a similar way; furthermore, this linguistic work remains

insufficiently attentive to the role of the reader in determining meaning. It is for this reason that it is necessary to consider some of the theoretical work in literary theory and cultural studies which is more welcoming to the notion of multiple interpretations. However, much of this literary work, including recent post-structuralist work, makes unquestioned assumptions about the nature of 'text' and its role in determining meaning, to the point that the reader is portrayed as a passive dupe. Because of the lack of attention to these two elements *together* – the role of the reader *and* the role of the text – we feel it necessary to construct a range of synthesised positions which have benefited from crossing these interdisciplinary boundaries. We call for a re-evaluation of the relation between reader and text, made possible by combining empirical linguistic study of the features of the text which lead to particular readings, with a literary/cultural theoretical study of the factors, such as race, class and gender, which lead to certain of these potential reading positions being adopted by the reader.

We have grouped these essays under three main headings: ethnographic/empirical readings linguistic readings and reception-theory/reader-response analyses. Broadly speaking, these groupings, which we discuss below, denote tendencies in the essays towards certain theoretical perspectives rather than others; however, none of the essays rests easily in these categories. And that is the result of efforts on all of our parts to integrate elements of theoretical work done in different fields, rather than simply to restrict ourselves to our own disciplinary boundaries. We have felt it important to produce interdisciplinary work and this has resulted in choices at several levels: firstly, we do not address just literary texts, but a wide variety of texts, ranging from films and pop-song lyrics, to modern poetry, advertisements and magazines; secondly, we have chosen texts from different historical periods and contexts – advertisements produced in present-day South Africa, nineteenth-century British short stories and art, twentieth-century American music; thirdly, we have drawn on a range of theoretical positions and disciplinary approaches. Our aims in doing this are to explore the heterogeneity of the reading process in relation to texts in different contexts, and to combine theoretical perspectives in order to produce new analyses.

We work in disciplines such as linguistics, literary theory, film and media studies, sociology, art history, and in all of these fields the reading process has been analysed in distinctly different ways. Yet, as feminists, it is important for us to produce analyses which combine elements from these fields, which is one of the defining characteristics of a great deal of work in women's studies and gender studies as a whole. We are not aiming to produce a synthesised approach; in fact, we are trying to work critically

with the idea that generic differences will necessarily yield theoretical and methodological differences. However, it is clear that each field can learn from the theorising of other disciplines especially through the challenge to long-held preconceptions (see, for example, Bowles and Klein 1983).

Working across disciplinary boundaries presents certain problems, for instance, in the overlap of different theoretical vocabularies for writing about the same thing: where critics working on advertising in cultural studies and following Judith Williamson might refer to a referent system, a literary theorist might prefer Roland Barthes' notion of a cultural code, or a linguist some concept of background knowledge (see Mills, and Thornborrow, this volume). None of these terms is, of course, the exact equivalent of the others (it is important to acknowledge that they have developed separately in different theoretical communities), but there are strong functional similarities that can sometimes leave the interdisciplinary reader wondering which set of terminologies to reach for.

However, interdisciplinary work can help us in tackling theoretical problems. For example, we have found it important to realise that questions around authorship in, say, the analysis of advertisements and films, because of the nature of their process of production, force us to try to develop new theoretical frameworks which can somehow deal with the notion of the text positioning the reader, without having to rely on a unitary author as the source of intelligibility of the text, as in traditional literary approaches. This work on advertising can lead us to formulate different models of authorship in literary analysis. Recent work in film studies has similarly been crucial in offering ways forward in how we can, as feminist readers, understand our pleasure in ostensibly recalcitrant texts (Stacey 1988; Pearce 1991). We have also found it useful to focus on the difference that style and speed of reading will make in terms of analysis. For example, an advertisement is often read in a particular way, usually focusing on images and headlines – a slack reading (see Wicomb, this volume) – whereas a literary text may be read either in a 'slack' way, skimming and skipping pages, or it may be read using close reading techniques, carefully analysing word by word, then rereading sections. Although we are not necessarily invited to read an advertisement using close literary analysis, such analysis can be profitable in terms of uncovering ideological assumptions. Thus, a cross-fertilisation can be usefully achieved across all of these different disciplinary approaches to the question of reading.

As we mentioned above, we have, despite these interdisciplinary concerns, decided to group the essays under several headings, and this is

because they do show tendencies towards certain trends within the analysis of reading as a whole. As such, these essays can be seen as attempts to debate, exemplify and work through certain positions. There are certain theoretical problems which these groupings point to, and each of the essays discusses these issues from a different perspective. Let us deal with each of these in turn.

ETHNOGRAPHIC/EMPIRICAL WORK

In many of the essays, we have found it important to base our work on real readers rather than on the way that we felt that readers would respond. Literary theorists have been particularly guilty of making assumptions about what readers or ideal readers think, based on the intuitions of the critic or theorist herself/himself. Even where literary critics have tried to involve real readers in the discussion of readership they have often still seemed to impose their own interpretative schemes onto these readers (see Richards 1929; Holland 1975). In some of the essays, we have attempted to follow the lead of critics such as Janice Radway and Bridget Fowler amongst others who have tried as far as is possible to map out the way that we read by analysing the responses of real readers (Radway 1987; Fowler 1991). By using questionnaires, interviews and group discussions, a number of the essays have tried to analyse the way that gender informs a reading response.

There are a number of practical and theoretical problems with attempting to focus on real readers and their responses. Firstly, it is difficult to bring to consciousness the processes by which we interpret, as Culler has noted: 'we understand very little about how we read' (Culler 1982: 265). Very often the processes by which we form an interpretative framework are ones which are not of our own making and are informed at a deep level by ideological knowledges; these processes may seem to us to be 'common sense' and in that way so self-evidently the *only* way to read that we may not be able to describe what it is we are doing. Secondly, when questioning readers, it is extremely difficult to verify if your respondents are telling you what they think that you want them to produce rather than what they really are experiencing. Whilst this is a problem with all empirical work, with reading it is very difficult to check whether respondents are giving accurate accounts of their reading processes, or whether in fact your questions are steering them into particular responses.

There is also the further theoretical issue that, according to many critics, ethnographic approaches to readership are entirely incompatible with text-based methods of analysis, especially those which postulate universalised models of reception based on psychoanalysis. From this perspective, the empirical data Mills and Bradby draw upon in their chapters in this volume, for example, should exclude them from talking about those same readers in terms of textual positioning, since the latter presupposes a different methodology. The conflict between these two approaches has been most evident among critics working in film and cultural studies, where there has been a split between the film theorists, who have concentrated on the textual positioning of the spectator (e.g. Laura Mulvey 1975), and television critics like David Morley (1986, 1989) and Ien Ang (1989), who have concentrated on setting up new models of audience research. In the battle for the 'true reader/viewer' which has resulted, the film theorists have dismissed the ethnographic approach of the cultural studies camp for its naive empiricism, while the cultural studies critics have been sharply critical of the film theorists' universalism and ahistoricism in constructing a reader positioning which takes no account of the experience of actual audiences.

Jackie Stacey offers a comprehensive overview of this debate (1992) and looks for a way of resolving the methodological crisis caused by this stark polarisation of textual reader/actual reader. One of her most salient points is that the discussion is a red herring to the extent that the audience responses culled by the ethnographic researcher are, themselves, *texts*, whose analysis may be informed by the same narrative or psychoanalytic models as those employed by the 'textual' critics. For Jane Feuer (1986) this restatement of textuality is regarded with irony, but Stacey sees it as a means of mediating between the two approaches. With respect to her research, which is based on a questionnaire of female cinema-goers from the 1940s and 1950s, she argues for a middle way in which the answers of her respondents are regarded as both textual *and* 'authentic', unconscious and conscious:

> Memories of Hollywood stars do need to be treated as texts in so far as they are forms of respresentation produced within certain cultural conventions. . . . I have argued for the importance of seeing my material as narrativized accounts of the past which produced particular 'treasured memories' in which the respondents may have had certain personal investments. However, to take such an approach is not to argue that what my respondents wrote me is fictional, and thus only of relative significance to other fictions. Taking account of the narrative formations of audiences' memories is not to rob them of their specificity, and to treat them as fictional narratives like the films they were watching. This would be to confuse categories of narrative and fiction. To argue that audiences produce narrative accounts of their responses to Hollywood is not to say that they may as well have made them up! (Stacey 1992: 137–8)

Allowing for this degree of textuality in the answers of her respondents, Stacey is able to elide the hypotheses of the film theorists concerning spectatorship with a more factitious approach to her findings: she is able to register the extent to which her respondents' accounts of fascination and identification cohere with psychoanalytic analyses of such processes, while at the same time allowing for their difference and dissent. This is not to say that such a negotiation is without problems (the subtext of Stacey's work is concerned with this), but that such a struggle is inevitable for any critic wishing to keep actual readers/spectators in view: to insist upon the social and historical specificity of the reading process. This is precisely the type of synthesis which the two chapters by Mills and Bradby attempt to address; however, Christie foregrounds this debate more in her chapter arguing that it is practically impossible to maintain a notion of positioning, whilst at the same time examining real readers. Drawing on Sperber and Wilson's linguistic work on relevance, she argues for stress on context, background knowledge and agency. This debate about empirical work is not restricted to these chapters alone: it informs the writing of many of the essays in this collection and for most of the writers it is important to try to refer to the responses of readers when discussing the processes by which we understand texts, at the same time as being aware of the theoretical difficulties which arise when this type of study is embarked upon.

LINGUISTIC ANALYSES

The chapters by Wicomb and Thornborrow within this section concentrate on exemplifying the way in which particular linguistic theories can be of use in understanding the process of reading. Wicomb draws on the work of Michel Pêcheux to analyse the wider discursive context of an advertisement, and Thornborrow uses critical linguistic analysis of two advertisements in order to try to examine in detail the way that advertisements which are targeted at particular gender groups differ in their address. Like Christie's chapter in the previous section, both chapters are concerned with analysing structures and patterns in texts, but not with the assumption that these structures are *located* within the text in any easy sense. These are not simple formalist analyses where linguistic items in a text are located and categorised as having one meaning or one function. Rather they use linguistic models which allow them to see the process of making sense of texts as a complex negotiation between reader, text and

the discursive structures within which both are situated. Meaning is not posited, as in some linguistic analyses, as a simple decoding process, as Christie demonstrates, but rather as a series of hypothesis formation on the basis of evidence which is negotiated between the traces in the text and the reader's background knowledge. Both of these essays try to go a stage further than much linguistic research in that they are concerned that features such as gender, race, class and sexual orientation are an integral part of linguistic analyses; these elements, in all of the essays in this book, are not considered to be extra-textual but factors which are an integral part of both the production and the reception of texts. Through close linguistic analyses of advertising texts Wicomb and Thornborrow reveal elements which help to document the process whereby texts 'make sense'; this concern with the language of the text is manifested in most of the other essays in this collection.

RECEPTION-THEORY/READER-RESPONSE ANALYSES

As Elizabeth Freund has noted, once a theorist has changed her focus of attention from a formalist analysis of the text itself to a concern with the reader, many other elements are also forced to change:

> the swerve to the reader assumes that our relationship to reality is not a positive knowledge but a hermeneutic construct, that all perception is already an act of interpretation, that the notion of a 'text' in itself is empty, that a poem cannot be understood in isolation from its results and that subject and object are indivisibly bound. (Freund 1987: 5)

This is indeed a wholesale change of perspective from conventional literary analysis of text.

A dissatisfaction with formalist accounts and with attempts to trace author intentions have led to concerns with the reader. Once the author is considered 'dead' (Barthes 1986), then it seems to be a logical move to try to institute the reader in that position of stability, so that the critic's interpretation can be anchored on firm ground. However, these essays question whether it is necessary simply to become enmeshed within the argument that either the text is dominant or the reader is dominant in the construction of meaning. Most recent work in this field shows that texts are not simply 'open' in Umberto Eco's sense, in that it is not possible simply to read texts in *any* way (see Iser 1978; Eco 1979; Culler 1982). Rather, it would seem that texts must structure the reader's response to