

in *Late Victorian England* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), a study of the late Victorian popular obsession with *The Merchant of Venice*.

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The problematics of postmodernism for feminist media studies

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Postmodernism is seen to have a particular relevance for media studies and for feminism. The former because of the postmodern quest to understand a media-dominated world and the latter because of the challenge to essentialism and insistence on difference proffered by postmodernism. However, there are few instances where the inconsistencies and difficulties that are raised by the combination of postmodernism and feminist media studies have been examined.¹

Within feminist media studies there has been a substantial difference between research into textual meaning and issues of representation and research into cultural and media policy with an emphasis on materialist matters. Broadly speaking, empirical and institutional studies often work within a structuralist framework. This includes policy-oriented work, studies of employment, discrimination and so on with a largely political economic agenda. Research more focused on the media product itself tends to be concerned with subjectivity, difference and meaning and is more frequently located in a culturalist paradigm. Operating within this paradigm, postmodern theorists argue for the fragmentation of the concepts used in 'modernist' social theory and a move away from a central theoretical concern with 'structure' to one of 'discourse'.

This *apparent* divide between postmodern and modern approaches has been hotly debated within feminist thinking more generally. Postmodernism has been viewed variously as either an unprecedented opportunity for women to forgo fixed identities and explore fluid subjectivities; an escape from the Enlightenment's establishment of methods of reasoning that were essentially male; or as a cultural movement that stifles the possibility for meaningful action just as feminism is beginning to make a political and social impact.

Media, Culture & Society, © 2000 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 22: 723-741
[0163-4437(200011)22:6:723-741;015786]

What is claimed to be at stake in abandoning modernity as an enabling structure is the fear of losing the notion of the women's movement, losing the idea of what it is to be a woman, and losing with this a politics of representation. If women cannot be characterized in any general way, how can feminism be taken seriously? If we must forfeit the category 'women' for the sake of philosophical sophistication, what political grounding does feminism have? At the centre of this debate between modernist and postmodernist thought is the difference between essentialist and non-essentialist feminism, the conflict between objectivism and relativism and the push towards thinking in terms of either gender equality or of gender difference. Each of these issues cuts across the connection between universalism (what it means to speak about and on behalf of 'women') and a politics of change (that recognizes material inequalities that may be based on gender).

This article explores what the debate between universalism and difference in feminist theory means for feminist media studies. It takes two of the key tenets of postmodernism which overlap with much of the work in the field of feminist media studies – the notion of representation as reality and audience resistance. In the context of the metaphemes of identity and difference, central to current feminist thinking, the article argues in line with Laclau (1996) that, without a universalism of sorts, the idea of equality in a fully functioning democratic society is impossible. However, use of the concept of universalism must be undertaken hand-in-hand with its deconstruction in order to recognize it as a contingent historical product. This is what I refer to as 'paradoxical universalism'. For feminist media studies this requires a mode of analysis which does not atomize and treat as separate the different phases of mass communications (Fenton, 1995) or individualize grossly our everyday experience of it. There has been a tendency in communication and media studies research to prioritize particular moments so that different emphases correspond to competing paradigms. In this way, news production studies (mostly undertaken from within political economy) which bring out the role of journalists tend to be disconnected from audience reception (mostly undertaken within cultural studies) which may only be loosely linked to textual analysis (Fenton et al., 1998). Rather, we need to examine production, content and reception as connected and integrated within transnational, national, local and personal socio-economic realities and in a way that is manageable within the practical constraints of empirical research. This is no small task.

The relationship of postmodernism to media studies and feminism

Craig Owens (1983) has suggested that 'women's insistence on difference and incommensurability may not only be compatible with, but also an

instance of postmodern thought' (Owens, 1983: 61–2). He was criticized for seeming to relegate feminism to the position of a subsidiary to a (male) main current. Nonetheless, he made a conceptual link between feminism's critique of patriarchy and the postmodern critique of representation.

In 1988, Fraser and Nicholson noted that 'since around 1980 many feminist scholars have come to abandon the project of grand social theory' (1988: 98). The gradual demise of that project is related to postmodernism. The feminist response has focused primarily on the problems of essentialism, universalism and legitimization on the one hand and on the intersection between the critique of patriarchy and the critique of representation on the other (Bertens, 1995).

Postmodernism and poststructuralism posit women as a non-self-evident category.² Feminist essentialism is exposed as a strategy of power, an attempt to enclose and foreclose the field of feminism which can backfire in policy debates: to attribute to women a set of essential characteristics or experiences (caring, compassionate, etc.) can have the effect of reproducing existing inequalities. Feminists therefore can unwittingly 'contribute to the regulation and reification of gender identities and along pretty traditional lines at that, a regulation and reification that it is surely one of the aims of feminism to disrupt' (Nash, 1994: 69). Feminist essentialism has been further criticized for beginning from a position based on Western constructs of feminism that focused on the notion of a global sisterhood of women universally united by oppression. In postmodernism the category of women is fluid, a political signifier. It is argued (Butler, 1990) that this celebration of the fluidity of boundaries resists the kinds of stabilization which seek to pin women down to something incontrovertible and instead expands the possibilities of what it is to be a woman. This includes re-drafting or redesignating the self not in an unproblematically voluntarist capacity but rather as a process which recognizes gender as more unstable and with more potential than is currently acknowledged in culture. This enables a reconceptualizing of identity and a deconstruction of the universal category 'woman', embracing the concept of difference within feminisms world-wide. And, as Butler (1992, 1993) argues, if gender is a staging of the body, a performance enacted on a daily basis, if woman is therefore put on, or applied, then there can be no natural female body. Instead, the body is only female and feminine to the extent that it is given these meanings right from the start. As Grosz says:

Feminism is placed in an unenviable position: either it clings to feminist principles that entail its avoidance of essentialist and universalist categories (in which case its rationale as a political struggle centred around women is problematised); or it accepts the limitations patriarchy imposes on its conceptual schemas and models and abandons the attempt to provide autonomous self-defined terms in which to describe women and femininity. (1995: 55)

One of the issues is whether feminism can survive as a radical politics if it gives up on a hierarchy of theory. Feminists have moved from grand theory to local studies, from cross-cultural analyses of patriarchy to the complex and historical interplay of sex, race and class, from the notion of a stable female identity or the interests of women towards the instability of female identity and the active creation and recreation of women's needs or concerns. Part of what drops out in these movements is the ability of women to speak about and on behalf of women as a category who are disadvantaged. This raises the question whether such developments leave feminists with nothing general to say (Barrett and Phillips, 1992: 7).

Representation as reality

The new cultural feminism, where postmodern approaches are located, can be contrasted to traditional feminism. Traditional feminism was interested in gender equality – a goal which cultural feminism implies has now been surpassed (Hermes, 1995a). Put crudely, traditional research on women and the media viewed mass-mediated communications as a major source for the general reproduction of patriarchal social relations. Much of this work rested on three main assumptions (not all of which are present in every instance): (1) that mass media imagery consists of unrealistic messages about women whose meanings are unambiguous and straightforward (for example, Tuchman, 1978); (2) that women (and men) passively and indiscriminately absorb these messages and meanings (for example, Dworkin, 1981); and (3) that we as researchers have some privileged access whereby we can recognize and resist such images (for example, Ferguson, 1983). Effects of the mass media were thereby generally conceived as detrimental to the general population and in particular to women.

The conception of a text with a unitary meaning gave way to a more sophisticated textual analysis that recognized multiplicity of cultural definitions within a media text. For example Modleski's (1982) study of soap opera which concludes that the text positions the spectator as the ideal Mother looking after and out for her family. This was important because it undermined the monolithic view of women as unconditional victims of a sexist media. However, studies like Modleski's do not distinguish between semiological levels of analysis and sociological levels of enquiry. They have little concept of a social audience, how people approach and deal with particular programmes in their particular lives. Ultimately the researcher is still only telling us what she thinks the text means. There has also been a shift from a consideration of what images did to women to what women could do with women's images. The traditional feminine sphere of the private and domestic was recognized as being both culturally constructed

and lived by women in different ways. Women's genres were recognized as giving a voice to women's experiences.³ The focus on women's genres was a political advance for feminist media studies. Genres such as soap opera and romance that had previously been labelled as 'trash', being largely consumed by women and focused on women's experiences, were given a new legitimacy. To claim such genres as worthy of study was seen as commensurate with claiming the personal as political in the general feminist struggle. The themes and values associated with so-called women's genres where narratives are located mainly in the private and public spheres were heralded by feminists as legitimate of study in their own right.

However, work on female genres was criticized for adhering to a 'conceptualisation of gender as a dichotomous category with a historically stable and universal meaning' (van Zoonen, 1996: 33), whereby the female experience is seen as being the same for all women. This was countered by studies that took their primary research interest to be the audience and their pleasures. Hermes describes this shift:

Critics who do not stop at equality but adopt a different approach stress the ambiguity of texts and raise new questions, including some about the pleasure that stereotyping and conventional media texts apparently offer women. The central issue is not social inequality but the popular text itself. (1995a: 58)

This perspective was influenced largely by Foucault who challenged the familiar hierarchy of value of the materialist perspective, counterposing the 'dumb' existence of reality with the ability of groups of signs (discourses) to act as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Barrett, 1992: 203, quoting Foucault). For poststructuralist feminists, the emphasis shifted from a determinist model of social structure to how discourses comprising words and statements and other representational forms brought together into a field of coherent textual regularity actively produce social realities as we know them. The material existence of women is seen to be borne through different, often competing discursive strategies which in naming, classifying or speaking the truth of women, also bring her into being. Power is conceptualized as highly dispersed rather than concentrated in identifiable places or groups. In media studies, this shift was seen in a move away from a political economic approach such as the gender-segmented labour market in cultural production to a concern with words, texts and representations.

Many postmodern theorists take the foregrounding of discourse one step further to claim that contemporary communication practices are non-representational and non-referential. In other words they have no purchase outside of the text, they have no separate external domain. Rather, they are self-reflexive and self-referential. Contemporary mediated culture then is no more than a constant recycling of images previously constituted by the

media. The recognition of media implosion has caused many postmodern theorists to question the practices of mass communication in terms of the relationship of an event and its media representation. It is claimed that the proliferation of new sophisticated media technologies makes it difficult, if not impossible, to discern the difference between images and reality. Moreover, many media images are hyperreal, that is more real than real. As Poster (1990: 63) explains, 'a communication is enacted . . . which is not found in the context of daily life. An unreal is made real. . . . The end result is a sensational image that is more real than real and has no referent in reality.' Thus the notion of representation becomes problematic. Contemporary media don't represent reality, they constitute it (Harms and Dickens, 1996).

The idea is that popular cultural signs and media images increasingly dominate our sense of reality, and the way we define ourselves and the world around us. It tries to come to terms with and understand a media-saturated society. Society has become subsumed within the mass media. It is no longer a question of the media distorting reality, rather the media have become reality – the only reality we have (Strinati, 1995). So, there is little point in studying the content of the mass media to see how it may affect our everyday lives; little point in counting instances of mediated hegemonic femininity and making an argument that this sustains the status quo; little point even in studying how people understand the media since 'one interpretation is not by definition better or more valid than another' (van Zoonen, 1996: 48). From the standpoint of postmodern relativism the media are reality, are inescapable, are our femininity. As McRobbie says:

We do not exist in social unreality while we watch TV or read the newspaper nor are we transported back to reality when we turn the TV off to wash the dishes or discard the paper and go to bed. Indeed perhaps there is no pure social reality outside the world of representation. Reality is relayed to us through the world of language, communication and imagery. Social meanings are inevitably representations and selections. Thus when the sociologists call for an account which tells how life really is, and which deals with the real issues rather than the spectacular and exaggerated ones which then contribute to the moral panic, the point is that their account of reality would also be a representation, a set of meanings about what they perceive as the real issues. (McRobbie, 1994: 217)

Postmodernists take this reasoning further to suggest that, as popular cultural signs take over in defining our sense of reality for us, this means that style takes precedence over content. This leads Hermes to state that feminism's 'overriding motivation should be to respect women and women's genres, and to demand respect for them from the world at large' (1995b: 151). Such an approach rules out any investigation of the media as an institution that frames, limits and helps to construct choices, pleasures and responses.

The idea that the mass media take over reality has been accused of exaggerating their importance (Strinati, 1995). Women's experiences are framed by many institutions, the mass media being but one of them. The notion that reality has imploded inside the media such that it can only be defined by the media is also questioned. Most people, it is claimed, would probably still be able to distinguish between the reality created by the media and that which exists elsewhere. Strinati is typical of this retort when he states, 'if reality has really imploded into the media how would we know it has happened?' (1995: 239). His response is that we only know it has happened because there are those who are all-knowing and have seen it. So, through extreme relativism, postmodernists are criticized for being in danger of becoming the very thing they deride – universalist. The proclamation that 'there is nothing but the text' involves universal truth statements – that there really are texts, that they really relate to other texts. The paradox is that those who defend relativism feel able to state categorically what really happens in the world and how it has come to be that way.

To claim that the media *are* our reality is further criticized by those who wish to point to the oppression of women as real. In this retort, reality is recognized as disorderly and fragmented but as also showing patterns of inequality. If the media are our reality it is argued that we effectively deny the existence of material inequalities unless they occur in representation:

Feminists struggled for decades to name 'sexism' and 'anti-lesbianism'. We said that particular images of women – bound and gagged in pornography magazines, draped over cars in advertisements, caricatured as mothers-in-law or nagging wives in sitcoms – were oppressive and degrading. The deconstructionist insistence that texts have no inherent meanings, leaves us unable to make such claims. This denial of oppressive meanings is, in effect, a refusal to engage with the conditions under which texts are produced, and the uses to which they are put in the dominant culture. (Kitzinger and Kitzinger, 1993: 15)

The world according to postmodernists is lived on the surface with nothing that hides behind appearances. Everyone and everything is living simulacra. No one experiences anything directly, there is only mediated reality resulting in a complete absence of lived experience. The concept of truth is destabilized to be replaced by speculation about the possible meanings of texts. This is where the media audience comes into its own – if experience only comes to us in textual form, if all reality is through representation – then the study of the way meaning is made in everyday life is crucial.

Audience as resistant

One of the main difficulties with postmodern media studies is the relationship between the assertion that representation is reality and the

equally voiced assertion that the audience is powerful and able to resist media messages. If the media is everywhere, is inescapable, it becomes difficult to conceive how it can be resisted, avoided and its constructedness recognized. Yet much postmodernism insists everyone is always actively resisting mediated reality through our knowledge of images and their construction. In other words we know we can't escape it, we know that it is as real as our material existence, but we also know that it is constructed and know that we can play a part in the meanings given to it. Each of us plays with the notion of constructedness taking whatever we choose from the bits and pieces at our disposal.

While modernism encouraged women to emulate ideal images encountered in magazines and on film, postmodernism has produced a more sceptical and knowing relationship with the image. Achieving the ideal is now a contradictory mix of rigorous bodily control and playful experimentation with dress, make-up and accessories. While this is liberating in freeing image for self-expression, it has also been accused of masking the gap between the image and women's continuing socio-economic struggles (Macdonald, 1997: 199). With the move to postmodernism, spectacle works to enlarge our fantasies, not bring us closer to identification with the particular or the material. Reverential attitudes and aspirations have been unsettled by a new awareness of the processes of image construction. In a postmodern age, fashion and cosmetics bring new freedoms in experimentation and play. Consumer culture is an arena of female participation and enjoyment; a route to developing multiple subjectivities for women from work to leisure that ensures women feel freed from the obligations of less liberated periods.

An emphasis on fantasy and the playful deconstruction and reconstruction of the self is similar to theories of the active audience from within feminist media studies. Such studies reacted against the simplistic conception of the process of mass communication as one of linear transmission from sender to receiver to claim that female audiences play a productive role in constructing textual meanings and pleasures. From this type of research, epitomized in the work of Ang (1985) and Radway (1984), came a celebration of the audience. In most of this work, audiences are seen as actively constructing meaning so that texts which appear on the face of it to be reactionary or patriarchal can be subverted. The subversion comes through the pleasures that are gained from it. For Ang (1996) the world of fantasy is the 'place of excess where the unimaginable can be imagined' (1996: 106). Again similar to postmodern claims of the resistive potential of the audience, active audience theorists in media studies have also been accused of political quietism and relativism gone mad.

Ang has attempted to overcome these criticisms by using Foucault's notion of discourse to undertake a poststructuralist analysis of the audience. As mentioned above, for Foucault, discourses are particular ways of

organizing knowledge in the context of serving specific types of power relationships. Foucault acknowledges that the real exists but maintains that since reality is only appropriated through discourse, it is discourse which is important. Ang's analysis concentrates upon institutional discourses about television audiences. These audiences do not exist naturally, nor can they be taken for granted. Rather they are constructed by particular discourses which seek to know them in order to exert power over them. For example, advertisers define audiences as consumers, and gather knowledge about their purchasing habits, because they want to sell to them. However, because audiences are constructed in this manner by the combination of knowledge and power within these discourses, it does not mean that real audiences will behave in the way predicted. Audiences can also be understood by the way they resist the discursive powers which try to construct them in ways which suit those powers. By exposing the discourses of the audience developed by the powerful television institutions, discourses which have also influenced academic studies of the audience, she hopes to shift attention back to the ordinary viewer. To achieve this it is necessary for research to look at 'the social world of actual audiences' and 'to develop the forms of knowledge about television audiencehood that move away from those informed by the institutional point of view' (Ang, 1991: 12).

However, Ang's use of the concept of power remains vague and abstract. The extent to which the space of fantasy is unconstrained and open to resistant readings is difficult to both accept and judge since the fantasies of romance readers to which Ang refers are more or less based on the romantic idyll promoted by romance novels. If power is vested in the hands of television institutions that seek to control audiences by discursive forms of knowledge, what are the particular reasons which make them do this? Is there a particular drive to exercise power that characterizes certain institutions? Are there specific social and historical reasons to explain why this should happen? Although Ang does provide evidence of the latter, a theory of this process still needs to suggest the interests that motivate power. Similarly, why should the power of institutions be resisted? What are the interests that motivate resistance to discursive power? Moreover, there is a tendency for this approach to dissolve the focus on power by seeing everything as discursively constructed, a problem heightened by the obfuscatory nature of the concept of discourse. For example, Ang suggests that to confront the institutional construction of audiences it is necessary to consider the 'social world of actual audiences'. However, this is in turn another discursive construction because 'we cannot presume to be speaking with the authentic voice of the real audience' as there is no such thing (1991: 165).

Ang accepts that institutional and academic knowledge about audiences is not completely useless, but it is difficult to substantiate this if all

knowledge is discursively constructed and we can never produce knowledge about real audiences. The problem for feminist media theorists is in laying claim to a particular reality while at once discrediting the concept of reality. Claims about unequal power relations can only be based upon some criterion which can distinguish between knowledge which is more useful and that which is less useful.

The active audience approach sits well with postmodern theory's emphasis on plurality and difference. Power rests with diverse audiences, not media barons or institutions. Active audiences produce local meanings from polysemic communications. The postmodern condition becomes characterized by a decentred subjectivity dispersed in time and space. In its most severe form this provides a vulgar reduction of Foucault, in which power is pluralistic and can be used by anybody, any time, any place, anywhere. It takes no account of the increasing power of multinationals and media conglomerates (mostly owned and controlled by men), increasing intervention by the state (operating firmly within patriarchy) and vastly unequal economic realities (working largely in favour of men). Or as Seiter et al. (1989) remind us, 'soap operas allow women to take pleasure in the character of the villainess, but they do not provide characters that radically challenge the ideology of femininity' (1989: 5).

The radical ability of the audience to create and play with meaning is said to release the reader from predictable, confirming signifieds. Or in the words of Ang (1996: 125), 'since a subject is always multiply positioned in relation to a whole range of discourses, many of which do not concern gender, women do not always live in the prison house of gender'. Furthermore, those moments where we can define ourselves despite our gender are declared as the truly liberatory ones. Based on the assumption that discourse is reality and there are always multiple discourses to choose from, the individual becomes a self-made jigsaw of bits and pieces. This frequently relegates to insignificance the fact that someone made the jigsaw pieces in the first place, shaped them, drew particular configurations on them, and gave them to us in particular packaging designed to appeal and to sell. The decentred self that resists and self-constructs at all times and is unbound by gender still reads the soap operas or the romantic novels and largely conforms to ideologies of femininity. Women are addressed and positioned by media texts in terms of their cultural expertise. To the extent that we respond to this invocation, we are positioned as female spectators (listeners, etc.). While the thought of being liberated as female spectators identity may seem attractive, it can also be depoliticizing. Lyotard argues that we inhabit a ragbag of language games and are shaped by so many forms of discourse that we can no longer say definitely who we are. If we deny the self's existence the possibility of agency and legitimate political and social inaction is weakened. The ability to criticize those media forms

that seek to interpellate gender in specific ways, largely to the detriment of women, may also be undermined.

Poststructuralism tells us that there is no pre-articulated gender identity. Postmodernism asserts that even if media consumption is gendered in some way it can only be understood by a close examination of meanings gained in particular contexts. Lyotard (1984) suggests that legitimation occurs only in the context of production of a particular knowledge. These can never be extended out to generalize about entire populations. This is what Ang and Hermes (1996) call postmodern particularism. This view accepts media saturation, inter-textuality, relativism and the availability of infinite subject positions.

Critics of such a particularist approach claim that all we are left with are descriptions of particular events at particular points in time which promote an individualist perspective and one that risks depoliticizing feminism. The problematic for feminist media theorists is whether to accept that sexism is based only on local legitimation or built into institutional structures. One response to this feminist dilemma is that profound gender scepticism is itself a critical reaction to the moral absolutism found in earlier feminism. The political act is to make reality appear unstable, complex and disorderly and thereby confront sexism.

While many feminists accept this as a legitimate political act, others wish to retain a theory that allows a focus on the social conditions and foundations for creating meaning and communication. In failing to situate analyses dialectically within larger historical and structural contexts, research has been criticized for a lack of historicity (Jameson, 1991). Much recent work on audiences has recognized the rampant relativism of previous active audience theory and sought to recoup the role of the media in the meaning-making process. Such work states that the meanings of mediated imagery are tied to a community and its shared experiences and to the actual ability of individuals to actively interpret it. This ability may depend on many things, not least educational and cultural capital, national, local and personal socio-economic realities (Fenton et al., 1998). From an anti-essentialist perspective, the concept of gender as discourse allows for the possibility of multiple subjectivities in women and men that may not always be gender-dominated. But are these discourses ever gender-neutral? An important point to remember from Foucault is that discourses reflect and produce power and certain discourses claim legitimacy over others. Aspects of contemporary mass media practices can be used to reproduce a repressive social system. There are also other material forces that shape the communication process.

The upshot of postmodernism for feminist media studies is that research should continue in an isolated preoccupation with the audience (even if it is radically contextualized), ignoring factors of production (such as the under-representation and under-payment of women in the cultural industries), the

centralization of mass cultural production and the subsequent limitation of representations on offer. But perhaps more worrying than the focus on one aspect of the mass communication process (which is, after all, a criticism that can be directed at the majority of media studies), is the way in which gender begins to lose its central position in understanding how the world operates.

Difference or indifference

By refusing a controlling subject, postmodernism derides modernist claims of logic and rationality. At the same time, as several postmodern feminists have pointed out, we need to be prepared to argue through and re-inspect openly the cultural and social positions from which we make our evaluations. Women need to challenge the linearity and certainties of those ways of thinking that have been called 'Enlightenment' and advocate more sceptical, self-aware and responsive modes of discussion. Arguments about positive images of women in the media to combat bias and ideology in gender representations have been rejected for assuming an essential or at least undifferentiated model of women's interests, experiences and identities to replace the negative images. If we want to argue for changing rather than deconstructing some of the myths of femininity that have lingered for centuries, do we need to admit to holding a rational position from which to argue this? Arguing that we should challenge rationality itself threatens to bite our critical noses off to spite our collective faces. We need to retain a historical approach to issues of identity and representation. Retaining a historical perspective means recognizing the structures and constraints of modernity while also recognizing that our existence in postmodern culture makes this a complex rather than a straightforward undertaking.

For Flax (1992a, 1992b), Fraser and Nicholson (1988) and others, postmodernism has had a wholesome effect on the feminist debate. Hegemonic patriarchal culture had already been exposed as constructed, not given, but postmodernism brought deconstruction into areas that (non-structuralist) feminism had left unexamined. Its insistence on difference has, for instance, deconstructed gender as a natural, essentialist category and has shown its constructed nature. But Fraser and Nicholson (1988: 100) are still wary of postmodern philosophy arguing for a 'postmodern feminist paradigm of social history without philosophy'. What is sought is the reconciliation of postmodern difference with Enlightenment emancipation. As Calhoun states, we need to acknowledge 'the real present day political and other reasons why essentialist identities continue to be evoked and often deeply felt' (1994: 14).

Bordo (1990) argues that it is too soon to let social institutions that have barely begun to respond to modernist social criticism 'off the hook via

postmodern heterogeneity and instability' (1990: 153). Harding (1996), who supports the attack on the Enlightenment subject – the naturalized, essentialized subject of liberal humanism – still cannot see how feminism could completely take leave of Enlightenment assumptions and remain feminist. For Skeggs (1991) it is difficult to see how people can travel through and live with differences unencumbered by structure.

In 1996, the British group Women in Journalism reported that 18 out of the 19 national daily and Sunday newspapers were edited by men. Most newsrooms are still heavily male-dominated 'testosterone driven, with laddishness oozing from the very templates of what makes news' (*The Independent*, 3 July 1996: 13). In 1994, the National Union of Journalists reported that in the UK women journalists predominated only in the lowest-paid sector – books. In every other area in the media industry, apart from the low-paid secretarial and clerical grades, women are in a minority (NUJ, 1994).

Material factors such as differential salaries and inadequate childcare provision, link gender difference to power relations in the cultural industries. Theories of modernity may have pushed feminist writers into a difficult corner but they also allowed oppression, violence and abuse by gender to be recognized and named. This may not necessarily have led to change – indeed, in many cases it has not; but disavowing completely the ideals of modernity in favour of a relativism which embraces difference within gendered categories while rejecting material differentials by gender raises the potential for encouraging indifference.

Braidotti (1992), Butler (1992), Flax (1992a, 1992b) and Spivak (1992) pursue a radical critique of modernity. Reason, humanity and equality are 'domination' Enlightenment concepts. To enlighten some was to regulate many others. The great achievements of rationality and knowledge were founded on disciplinary practices of a new order and dimension. This kind of questioning need not mean the abandonment of all reason: instead, it asks after the construction of reason or rationality. If feminism is one of the products of modernity and if it cannot and should not represent all women, how do we create a politics of feminism, to whom do we speak?

For Spivak, the community of women can only come after the recognition of difference between women, and after the raising of some of the key questions about who is talking to whom and why. This is a similar position to that described by Judith Butler, who also engages with a notion of a community of women. In articulating women from a feminist standpoint, such a category is immediately broken and it is the breaking that is the important point (Butler, 1992). Who is not spoken to in feminism? In addition, who was the 'subject' of feminism, but is no more? How has feminism opened itself out to speak to many female subjects and yet still engage with only a few? Relating this to feminist media studies we could ask, why is feminist media studies so restricted to certain areas? Is it

because the work undertaken is constructed not only by and about women, but also for and only of relevance to women (Brundson, 1997)?

Butler (1992) disputes the assumption that there must be a foundation and a stable subject to have a politics, seeing this as authoritarian. She asserts that postmodernism does not mean that we have to do away with the subject but rather ask after the process of its construction. The value of postmodernism is therefore that, like deconstruction, it shows clearly how arguments bury opposition: 'What women signify has been taken for granted for too long . . . we have to instead break from the list of meanings and expand the possibilities of what it is to be a woman' (Butler, 1992: 16). But can postmodernism deliver such a political transformation if it does not allow us to speak in ethical or moral terms? The question then becomes can we use postmodernism to incorporate difference and reject essentialism, in the manner that feminist theory would support, but reject a depoliticizing relativism? Can we have our proverbial cake and eat it?

Spivak (1984, 1992) believes we can. She conceives of concepts and theoretical principles not as guidelines, rules or blueprints for struggle but as tools and weapons of struggle. It is no longer a matter of maintaining a theoretical purity at the cost of political principles, nor is it simply a matter of the ad hoc adoption of theoretical principles. It is a question of negotiating a path between always impure positions – seeing that politics is already always bound up with what it contests (including theories) – and that theories are always implicated in various political struggles. She argues in this context for the 'strategic use of essentialism':

You pick up the universal that will give you power to fight against the other side, and what you are throwing away by doing that is your theoretical purity. Whereas the great custodians of the anti-universal are obliged therefore simply to act in the interest of a great narrative, the narrative of exploitation while they keep themselves clean by not committing themselves to anything. . . . They are run by a great narrative even as they are busy protecting their theoretical purity by repudiating essentialism. (Spivak, 1984: 184)

There can be no feminist position that is not in some way or other involved in patriarchal power relations. A purity from patriarchal 'contamination' entails feminism's incommensurability with patriarchy – thus the inability to criticize it (Grosz, 1995). As Braidotti (1991: 164) has cautioned, unless we take the possibilities opened by difference as our starting point, women, 'the external servants at the banquets of life . . . will have to satisfy themselves with the crumbs of modernity'.

The above approaches introduce the possibility of retaining the *concept* of facts and analysing the different roles they can have in differing contexts. Marshall (1994) endorses a theory which is post-positivist, critical of the hegemony of Western 'reason'; listens to 'local stories'; rethinks the notion of a coherent pre-existing 'subject' and rejects the universalizing impulse of 'grand narratives'. But she also believes that 'it is possible to

radically challenge the principles of the "project of modernity" as it has been construed in Western social theory, and to reshape its categories of analysis, without severing all ties to its emancipatory aspirations' (1994: 159). Analysing how your cake is made doesn't mean you can't still eat it (Edwards et al., 1995).

The strategic questions that face contemporary feminism are now informed by a much richer understanding of heterogeneity and diversity: but they continue to revolve around the alliances, coalitions and communalities that give meaning to the idea of feminism. Not only is the concept of 'woman' crucial to grasp the gendered nature of the social world, but so is that of patriarchy in order that we do not lose sight of the power relations involved. As Denise Riley (1988) has pointed out, 'woman' is indeed an unstable category, but one whose instabilities are none other than the subject matter of feminist politics. One may object to the Enlightenment dualisms in which the feminine, or women, are always cast as inferior to the masculine, or men, but total postmodern abandonment of these binary structures runs the risk of political suicide.

Conclusion

In an attempt to deal with the discontents of postmodernism, Bauman (1997) argues that postmodern politics aimed at the creation of a viable political community needs to be guided by the trine principle of Liberty, Difference and Solidarity; solidarity being the necessary condition and the essential collective contribution to the well-being of liberty and difference – one thing which the postmodern condition is unlikely to produce on its own without a political intervention. Without solidarity, he argues, no freedom is secure, while the differences and the kind of 'identity politics' they tend to stimulate end up more often than not in the internalization of oppression:

. . . as with all principled politics, so the postmodern politics is replete with risks of defying its own principles; in this respect its only advantage over other varieties of politics is that it is fully aware of such danger and therefore inclined to monitor carefully its own accomplishments. Above all it is reconciled to the absence of perfect solutions and guaranteed strategies, to the infinity of its own tasks and to the probable inconclusiveness of its efforts: this is perhaps the best available protection against the trap . . . of promoting oppression in the guise of emancipation. (Bauman, 1997: 208)

Feminist scholarship exists and its very existence indicates the continuance of patterns of discrimination articulated through gender. This is not predicated on a rigid universalism that refuses to acknowledge difference. Rather, it recognizes that universalism itself is constructed, has a history, is imbued with complex power relations, but nonetheless exists.

This approach challenges us to deconstruct universalism and requests that we reclaim the term as our own. We could usefully term this 'paradoxical universalism'. As Geraghty (1996) points out, work on media ownership, control and regulation has largely been undertaken by male academics. Thus, we still need feminist analyses of the media industries, even as we still need feminist textual analyses that state that the mass media portray dominant characteristics that are gendered and limited, and then to see how audiences work through their media consumption in their everyday lives. We also need to break with the hegemony of white/Western femininity that is reproduced in feminist media scholarship. We must do all of this without naturalizing sexual difference and at the same time ensuring we resist anthropological meanderings. Without this, we cannot answer questions about the influence of the media on ideology or belief or patriarchy.

Furthermore we need to adopt a holistic concept of mass communications that accepts the process of communication as a complex interaction of unequal relationships of power (Fenton et al., 1998), however difficult this may be to translate empirically. We need a mode of analysis which is connective and integrative and which tracks the social and ideological relations that prevail at every level between cultural production and consumption (McRobbie, 1994), from the production of cultural texts through textual analysis of cultural objects and their meanings to the study of lived cultures and experiences (Dickens, 1996). We need to examine the relationship between beliefs about gender and the political conclusions drawn by the public and the relationship between political conclusions and taking political action.

Through the sheer difficulty of living with difference, we do not have to abandon the feminist project. While the problems with the homogeneity of the term 'woman' have been recognized, political engagement still renders it necessary (Riley, 1987). By asserting a paradoxical universalism we can assure that we do not erase women from the feminist project within media studies while binary systems of gender that disadvantage women remain firmly in place.

Notes

1. Notable exceptions to this are Ang (1996) and McRobbie (1994).
2. It is recognized that postmodernism and poststructuralism are not one and the same thing. Several distinctions are made between them within this article to take account of the differences, but for a fuller discussion see Barrett and Phillips (1992).
3. This is a grossly simplified account of feminist media research and should not be read as suggesting that feminist media studies has moved on a linear path from simple content analysis to the more sophisticated understanding of discourse that rejects the idea of media images' independent meanings or impact on those who

consume them. Indeed, research continues on all aspects of media using a wide range of theoretical perspectives. Feminists continue to produce textual analyses that imply or assume the importance of the media's manifest content and narrative form alongside studies that use ethnographic techniques to demonstrate the power of the audience to construct their own meanings. There are also studies which include both textual and reception analysis (see Mumford, 1998 for a good summary of much feminist research in the field of television studies).

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