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Feminism

Susan J. Douglas

On September 7, 1968, Robin Morgan, a former child television star, along with other feminists, organized several busloads of women to stage a demonstration against the Miss America pageant. There, on the Atlantic City boardwalk, they crowned a sheep “Miss America,” set up a “Freedom Trash Can” into which various trappings of femininity like curlers and bras were hurled, and held up signs that read “Welcome to the Miss America Cattle Auction” (Douglas 1994, 13). It is hardly surprising that the first major feminist demonstration of the late 1960s targeted one of the highest rated programs on television; second-wave feminists, starting with Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), had singled out the mass media as a central culprit in promoting sexist representations of women. By 1970, when feminists staged a sit-in at *Ladies’ Home Journal* to protest its retrograde depiction of women, women at *Newsweek* and *Time* sued the magazines for sex discrimination, and the Women’s Strike for Equality in August featured guerrilla theater ridiculing the widespread objectification of women, it was clear that media criticism had become a foundational tenet of feminism.

Feminist scholars embraced this agenda, and feminist media studies was born. It was driven by the conviction that sexism and discrimination against girls and women in employment, education, relationships—indeed all aspects of everyday life—were driven and legitimated by dismissive stereotypes of women in the

media. And its analytical framework was simple yet intellectually transformative: that society was structured, institutionally and ideologically, through patriarchy—the domination of men over women.

In its early stages, feminist media studies sought to corroborate activists’ charges that women in magazines and advertising, on television, and in films were primarily young, white, slim, shown almost exclusively in passive or helpmate roles or, worse, used simply as sex objects, and conformed to very narrow, corporately defined standards of beauty. In addition, with very few exceptions, there were no female television reporters or news anchors, and in entertainment programming women rarely had careers. Much feminist media scholarship in the early 1970s, labeled as analyzing “sex role stereotypes,” relied on content analysis to quantify what kinds of roles women had in TV shows or how often female voiceovers (as opposed to male) were used to sell a host of products like laundry detergent or cosmetics (answer: only 6 percent) (Busby 1975). One study found that 75 percent of all ads using females were for products found in the kitchen or bathroom (Dominick and Rauch 1972). The communications researcher George Gerbner coined a term for this, “symbolic annihilation”: the systematic underrepresentation of a particular group or groups and/or media representations that favor stereotypes and omit realistic portrayals (Gerbner and Gross 1976). Other scholars developed a “consciousness scale” to rank the depictions of women, from level 1, women as quintessential dumb blondes, victims, or sex objects, to level 4, the rare depictions of men and women as equal, to level 5, more rare, where women were shown as individuals or even in roles typically reserved for men (Butler and Paisley 1980; Pingree et al. 1976).

Meanwhile, feminist analyses of film, like Molly Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape* (1974) and Marjorie Rosen’s *Popcorn Venus* (1973), documented how women

had been represented in the movies and the increased sexualization of women and rising violence against them in films. Thus, initial analysis of women in the media employed both social science and humanities methodologies.

In Britain, a very different turn took place that revolutionized feminist analyses of the media. First, in 1972, art critic and novelist John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* launched a full-bore critique of how women were represented in oil paintings and later in advertising. Berger argued that female nudes were painted for the pleasure of male viewers, that women were constantly under surveillance, and that such depictions persisted right up to the present. As a result, women had learned to constantly watch themselves being watched. They were "split into two," seeing themselves as "surveyed" (being looked at), and surveying themselves through male eyes, essentially turning themselves into objects (1972, 46–47). The book had an enormous impact on feminist media studies because it demystified the portrayal of women in art and advertising, and urged readers to see these images as part of an ongoing system of patriarchal representation that structured (while obfuscating) the very way we take in gendered images without much thought.

Then, in 1975, the British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey published "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in the journal *Screen*, a scant thirteen-page article that broke entirely new ground in how scholars analyzed female imagery. Mulvey was not concerned with the various roles women played in films or whatever stereotypes inhered in them. Rather, she took on the filmic apparatus of how viewers, in a darkened movie theater, saw women on the screen, through what she identified as the three "gazes"—that of the male director and cameraman and then the male costars, which positioned the audience's gaze as that of a heterosexual man.

Hollywood cinema turned women into sexual objects, "to-be-looked-at," sexual spectacles, and nothing else. Men were the active agents advancing the narrative of the film, "making things happen," while women interrupted or worked against the advancement of the story line (Mulvey 1975, 11–12). Thus, like Berger, Mulvey insisted that beyond analyzing stereotypes, the very ways in which our viewing of imagery is structured and maps onto our psyches were crucially important to feminist media studies.

Mulvey's work electrified feminist media scholars. Some took up her call to apply psychoanalytical theory to film analysis, some began to rethink how female spectators related to media texts, while others challenged what they saw as her overarching position about how all film spectators were positioned as heterosexual men. And feminist scholars began to apply theoretical frameworks from neo-Marxism and poststructuralism, especially Michel Foucault's notion of "discourses" or discursive regimes, ways of constituting knowledge and power relations that gain an aura of truth and produce particular forms of subjectivity. The concept of fragmented subjectivity—that women, especially, are socialized to inhabit multiple subject positions, some of them in conflict with each other, and learn to identify with contradiction itself (Williams 1984)—also gained considerable influence in conceptualizing how women engaged with media texts. And Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of ideological hegemony—the process by which beliefs and values that benefit elites become a kind of "common sense" that nonelites consent to and adopt—also influenced feminists' analysis of how the media affirmed, but also at times undermined, patriarchy.

Two threads began to emerge then in feminist media studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One continued to explore how various media forms, especially those

geared to women, like romance novels, soap operas, or melodramas, promulgated patriarchal values that reaffirmed sexism and helped keep women in their place. What was important here was that feminized media texts previously considered beneath contempt became objects of study. The British scholar Angela McRobbie, in her reading of *Jackie* (1978), a magazine for teenage girls, laid out how dismissing such a publication as “silly, harmless nonsense” ignores the powerful ideological work it does in socializing girls into restrictive codes of femininity. Another line of work, however, began to ask why women might take pleasure in media texts created for them even if such texts were denigrated as examples of “trashy” mass culture. McRobbie’s colleague Charlotte Brunsdon (1997) focused on the “despised” British soap opera *Crossroads* and argued that such shows both engage with genuine, everyday challenges women face and, more to the point, assume and cultivate particular viewing repertoires that are complex and add to women’s pleasures in the text.

A pioneering work here was Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984), in which she interviewed dedicated readers of romance novels. Taking on scholars who saw women’s engagement with the highly popular Harlequin novels as evidence of a kind of false consciousness, and a willing subjugation to patriarchal ideology, Radway found that despite narratives that affirmed women’s subordination to men, the novels also provided satisfying fantasies of women humanizing the male heroes, making them more nurturing and caring. Radway’s work pointed out that while it was important for feminist scholars to deconstruct media texts, it was also crucial to pay attention to the female audience, to understand how they read media texts both with and against the grain.

Several scholars took up the charge of studying female media consumers to report what meanings

they—and not academic analysts alone—got from media texts. One of the most important of these studies was Jacqueline Bobo’s *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995) because the overwhelming majority of feminist media studies in the 1970s and 1980s was written by and about white women. In 1988, the filmmaker Alile Sharon Larkin (1988) wrote one of the first analyses of the recurring stereotypes of African American women in film—as mammies, maids, and “tragic Mulattos”—the interconnections between racism and sexism that informed them, and how black women filmmakers were seeking to reclaim their own image making. Bobo’s book was the first in-depth study of black women as cultural consumers, and she interviewed them about their responses to novels and films featuring African American women. Like Radway, she framed them as an interpretive community every bit as legitimate as academic scholars, whose cultural domination and social activism powerfully informed their textual interpretations, often in empowering ways.

Andrea Press took up the charge of attending to the audience as well. In *Women Watching Television* (1991), Press interviewed forty women of different ages and socioeconomic status, and found that social class powerfully shaped the extent to which women identified with TV characters and found TV to be “realistic.” And Press was one of the early scholars to identify the rise of “post-feminist era television” characterized by a superficial acceptance of feminism coupled with a “trend for women to be shown back in the home” with their family role emphasized and a deemphasis on female friendship and solidarity (38).

As a historian interested in media texts, I wanted to explore how the representations of women had evolved over time, particularly with the rise of the women’s movement. And I was especially influenced by feminists’ emphasis on women’s contradictory relationship

to and readings of popular culture, and by feminist film and video makers like Joan Braderman, whose *Joan Does Dynasty* (1986) simultaneously luxuriated in the pleasures of the show and offered a thorough deconstruction of its ideological work. My book *Where the Girls Are* (1994) sought to review both the sexist and progressive images of women in the media post–World War II up to the early 1990s, and to argue that in their efforts to address and contain women’s aspirations in the 1960s, the media inadvertently helped launch the women’s movement.

As the field branched out, scholars like Mary Celeste Kearney (2006), Sharon Mazzarella and Norma Pecora (1999), and Joan Jacobs Brumberg (1998) focused on girls and the media and other scholars began to study television shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and, later, *Twilight*, and their appeal to female audiences. Suzanna Walters (2003), Larry Gross (2002), and Katherine Sender (2005), among others, corrected the neglect of LGBT representations and audiences, and chronicled the rise of gay visibility in the media. All of this further expanded the field’s objects of study and its modes of analysis.

One of the most significant challenges for feminist scholars at the turn of the twenty-first century was, indeed, confronting what had come to be labeled “post-feminism,” a discursive framework that assumes full equality for women has been achieved, that feminism is therefore unnecessary and outdated, and that women can and should, as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra put it, “enthusiastically perform patriarchal stereotypes of sexual servility in the name of empowerment” (2007, 3). Feminist scholars also had to incorporate in their work analyses of neoliberalism—the notion that the market, not the government is the best arbiter of the distribution of goods and services—to account for the media’s insistence that the most important product women now

create is themselves, so they can compete effectively in that market. Rosalind Gill in *Gender and the Media* (2007a) analyzed the renewed and intensified sexualization of girls and women in the media at the very same time that feminist ideas are also taken for granted. Angela McRobbie’s *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) powerfully documented “a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment” (1) in the media in which feminism is indeed “taken into account” in media texts primarily so that it can be dismissed as no longer necessary, “a spent force.” This work was crucial to my own analysis (Douglas 2010) of the rise in the twenty-first century of “enlightened sexism,” a new, sneaky, subtle form of sexism that seems to accept female achievements on the surface, but is really about repudiating feminism and keeping women in their place. Enlightened sexism insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism—indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved—so now it’s okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women.

The impact of feminist analysis in media studies has been profound and far-reaching. It has transformed how scholars analyze not just entertainment media, but the news, media effects and reception, industry structures and employment practices, programming decisions, and the small number of women, still, who get front-page bylines and op-eds in newspapers and serve as sources and experts in the news media. It has launched analyses of how various masculinities are represented in the media, as well as work on sexuality and on the intersections between race, class, and gender on multiple media screens. And now a new generation of scholars is turning its attention to the possibilities and perils for women in the world of the Internet and social media, where facelessness and anonymity are both giving feminists a new platform and enabling the expression of virulent misogyny. The fragmentation of the

audience, the proliferation of user-generated content, the multiple platforms through which media texts are consumed, and the ongoing war between feminism and antifeminism are presenting new challenges and opportunities for further elaboration of feminist media analysis to the ongoing, explosive changes in our digital environment and how it too is now profoundly shaping gender identity, performance, relationships, and the still elusive hope for gender equality.

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Flow

Derek Kompare

When first formulated in his seminal 1974 book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Raymond Williams's concept of flow was a compelling metaphor of the ideological power of television. Focusing on the output of five television channels (from Britain and the United States) over several hours, Williams deconstructs programming into discrete segments, and then explains how these segments, as delivered in a succession of sounds and images, become more than the sum of their parts. In doing so, he expands the scope and vocabulary of textual analysis by showing how the overall flow of the broadcast schedule, with its constant breakup and reassembly constitutes "perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting" (86).

Over the past forty years, the concept of flow has been used in media studies as a conceptually influential, but ultimately limited model for the textual analysis of television content, or more broadly as a metaphor for postmodern culture, of which television is the ultimate exemplar. The former usage shows up in close analyses of television content in the immediate wake of the publication of Williams's work. Scholars trained in literary and/or film theory incorporated Williams's concept into their studies of television as an ongoing semiotic system that reinforces dominant ideologies while inoculating audiences with glimpses of "resistant" perspectives (see Altman 1986; Browne 1984; Feuer 1983; Modleski 1983). Tania Modleski, for example, critiqued Williams's construction of the (ostensibly male)