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LAWRENCE AND WISHART
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1928; Blue Ribbon Books, New York 1928 Covici-Friede Inc; New York
 1928, Pegasus Press Paris, 1928; reprinted 1929: Falcon Press London,
 1948; Permabooks, New York, 1969; Transworld Publishers, London
 (Corgi), 1968; Virago Press, London, 1981.
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Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics

Michèle Barrett

Cultural politics are crucially important to feminism because they involve struggles over *meaning*. The contemporary Women's Liberation Movement has, by and large, rejected the possibility that our oppression is caused by either naturally given sex differences or economic factors alone. We have asserted the importance of consciousness, ideology, imagery and symbolism for our battles. Definitions of femininity and masculinity, as well as the social meaning of family life and the sexual division of labour, are constructed on this ground. Feminism has politicized everyday life – culture in the anthropological sense of the lived practices of a society – to an unparalleled degree. Feminism has also politicized the various forms of artistic and imaginative expression that are more popularly known as culture, reassessing and transforming film, literature, art, the theatre and so on.

Immediately we begin to think about this it becomes difficult to say exactly what is meant by cultural politics. If I spray-paint a sexist advertisement this is quite clearly cultural politics. But if I do it so imaginatively that a feminist photographer captures it for the walls of an alternative art gallery, has my illegal graffiti then become feminist art? The distinction between art and culture is a vexed one, but there are political (as well as academic) reasons for thinking it through further.

Raymond Williams, who recently published a book entitled *Culture* (Williams, 1981), sensibly refuses to give a snap definition of the term. Instead he outlines the historical

meanings of the concept and discusses more recent influences on his own use of it. To the anthropological and popular uses that I have already mentioned he adds the current interest in 'signification' – systems of signs, cutting across the conventional division between art and popular culture, through which meaning is constructed, represented, consumed and reproduced.* But if culture is difficult to define, art is certainly impossible. In the absence of any convincing account of what is intrinsically 'aesthetic', art can only be that which is defined as art in a particular society at a particular time. Indeed the category of 'art' is not a universal one.

I raise these problems at the outset since the purpose of this paper is to question what we mean by art and culture in the context of current feminist practice. Is a work of art a battleground for ideological struggle in the same way as a sexist poster? Or are there qualities to art that render a directly political approach less relevant? To engage in cultural politics is to take a stance on these questions and it is here that I want to start.

I. When Is Art Feminist Art?

Bearing these problems in mind I want to look first at how we could describe something such as a film or a painting as 'sexist' or 'feminist'. Recent films such as *Girlfriends*, or *An Unmarried Woman*, or *Coma*, all depict women as less passive and dependent than they were in previous commercial films. This leads us to ask in what sense they might be called 'feminist' films. We notice that the sanctified orthodoxy of the soap opera

* Williams summarizes the present co-ordinates of the term 'culture' as follows: 'Thus there is some practical convergence between (i) the anthropological and sociological senses of culture as a distinct "whole way of life", within which, now, a distinctive "signifying system" is seen not only as essential but as essentially involved in all forms of social activity, and (ii) the more specialized if also more common sense of culture as "artistic and intellectual activities"; though these, because of the emphasis on a general signifying system, are now much more broadly defined, to include not only the traditional arts and forms of intellectual production but also all the "signifying practices" – from language through the arts and philosophy to journalism, fashion and advertising – which now constitute this complex and necessarily extended field.'

is being invaded by the introduction of dangerous topics like abortion or the double standard of sexual morality, and we wonder whether a feminist has actually managed to get a job on *Crossroads* or *The Archers*. *Spare Rib*, by far the most widely read feminist magazine in this country, devotes a lot of space to reviews of the media and the arts and many of them turn on the question of *how feminist* are the particular books or shows being reviewed. This is a fairly clear-cut issue when we think of an appallingly degrading advertisement or a polemical new novel by a well-known feminist, but the grey area between them is much more difficult to assess. And yet this grey area covers an enormous amount of ground. Let us take just two examples.

A controversy has arisen on the question of pornography. Many feminists will argue that pornography, certainly as produced in contemporary Britain, is not merely sexist but an expression of male violence against women which must be confronted and eradicated. The images of pornography are seen as directly exploitative of, and degrading to, women and they are linked to rape and other forms of male violence. The 'Reclaim the Night' movement highlights this connection in its political campaign to make the streets safe for women by siting its demonstrations in areas like Soho where sex-shops and sex-cinemas abound. Many feminists nonetheless feel ambivalent or opposed to blanket censorship. When, they ask, is erotica pornography and vice-versa? To some degree the problem lies in the fact that an image itself is not necessarily either pornography or erotica – it becomes so when viewed as such. Some feminist bookshops recognize this by roping off a 'women only' section of lesbian erotica: to us it's a legitimate artistic celebration of female sexuality but for voyeuristic men it would be pornography.

The women's group at my college put on a play by a feminist theatre group in which a rape scene was depicted and it was clear that the meaning of the scene was very different for the feminists at the front and the men from the rugby club who rushed in from the bar (laughing) when they heard what was going on. So the image itself, or the play or whatever, might not necessarily be intrinsically sexist or feminist, it may depend on who is reading or receiving it and how they do so. The image itself may often be ambiguous, at least partially open to the

different meanings we choose to construct upon it.

This ambiguity is present in all art forms, not only in the visual arts where it is perhaps most widely recognized. My second example comes from literature. Feminist literary critics have drawn attention to the impassioned rebellion against male definitions of women's lot which have from time to time erupted in the work of even the most classical of female novelists.

Charlotte Brontë is a case in point. Her novels contain many passages of overt feminist polemic and display a profound scepticism about the ideology of romantic love as it affects women. Let us look at one passage which can easily be read as a feminist protest. In her novel *Shirley* Brontë describes the feelings of Caroline Helstone for the man she loves. One evening he is sufficiently warm to her for her to feel that he returns her love but he, in fact, must be wary of falling for a woman as poor as Caroline and when she meets him the next day he is cold and withdrawn towards her. Caroline is bitterly disappointed and Charlotte Brontë writes:

A lover masculine so disappointed can speak and urge explanation; a lover feminine can say nothing; if she did, the result would be shame and anguish, inward remorse for self-treachery. Nature would brand such demonstration as a rebellion against her instincts, and would vindictively repay it afterwards by the thunderbolt of self-contempt smiting suddenly in secret. Take the matter as you find it; ask no questions; utter no remonstrances; it is your best wisdom. You expected bread and you have got a stone; break your teeth on it, and don't shriek because the nerves are martyred: do not doubt that your mental stomach – if you have such a thing – is strong as an ostrich's: the stone will digest. You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion. Show no consternation: close your fingers firmly upon the gift; let it sting through your palm. Never mind: after your hand and arm have swelled and quivered long with torture, the squeezed scorpion will die, and you will have learned the great lesson how to endure without a sob. For the whole remnant of your life, if you survive the test – some, it is said, die under it – you will be stronger, wiser, less sensitive. This you are not aware of, perhaps, at the time, and so cannot borrow courage of that hope. Nature, however, as has been intimated, is an excellent friend in such cases; sealing the lips, interdicting utterance, commanding a placid dissimulation: a dissimulation often wearing an easy and gay mien at first, settling

down to sorrow and paleness in time, then passing away, and leaving a convenient stoicism, not the less fortifying because it is half-bitter (Brontë, 1965: 81-82).

It would not be surprising if a contemporary feminist 'reading' of this passage stressed the progressiveness of this angry yet perceptive outburst. The stone on which we must break our teeth and the scorpion we must suffer to crush are extreme and uncompromizing images which resonate with our own passionate anger. Yet we should not be led into projecting too much onto passages such as this one. It is, on closer reading, an ambivalent outburst. How seriously do we take Brontë's reference to 'nature' as the source of our suffering? It is all too easy to invoke the convenient literary critical notion of 'irony' and credit Brontë with satirizing the assumption that women's inferior situation is naturally given. But are we justified in doing so when even the passage quoted, let alone the overall tenor of her novels, expresses a clear belief in resignation, in stoicism, as the characterful resolution of such anguish?

The passage quoted is ambivalent and contradictory. A novel by Charlotte Brontë can be read neither as a feminist polemic nor as an unconscious expression of attitudes to femininity current in her lifetime. One way in which literary critics have tried to throw light on the supposed intended meaning of the text is by examining the life and beliefs of the author. But this is not necessarily of much use to us. We know, for instance, that Charlotte Brontë suffered from and railed against the constraints imposed upon women of her class at that period; we also know that at the end of her life she married and settled down with a man she was not in love with. Facts such as these may or may not throw much light on the question of 'how feminist' the novels are. I suspect they do not. Further, and this is a serious problem, I suspect that if we are honest about it we might admit that our reading of such texts is profoundly influenced by our knowledge of the sex of the author: in *Shirley*, when Charlotte Brontë refers to 'nature' we credit her with an ironic exposure of the irrationality of socially constructed ideologies, but if a man had written the same passage we could be accusing him of biologism. This can be a dangerous route to an interpretation of fiction – not least in that

it ignores the fact that the work in question is one of *fiction* – a point I shall come back to later.

For the moment I want simply to note two points. First, that the 'sexism' or 'feminism' of particular works of art or images is not self-evident, or in any unambiguous way intrinsic to that work, but depends upon how we read it. Second, that knowledge of the sex of the author cannot be a reliable guide to the meaning of the text – it cannot tell us what the intentions of the author might have been and in any case these do not necessarily give us the meaning of the text as different readers experience it. I am not disputing that an image or text carries with it a dominant, or preferred, reading and that the relationship between the consumer and the work is one in which meaning is constructed within a particular range of options. But I want to suggest that this given range of meaning may serve to identify the issues at stake rather than determine an interpretation of them. The text may ensure that we read it in terms of sexual politics, for instance, but it cannot legislate against the reader drawing inferences that are the reverse of those offered by the text.

II. When Is Women's Art Feminist Art?

This leads to a second problem. This is the question asked by Rosalind Coward in her article 'Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?' (Coward, 1980). Although Coward's piece is directed towards one particular review article on feminist fiction, her argument is in fact a generalized critique of a major (if not the main) tendency in feminist literary criticism. She argues that feminists have emphasized the unity and continuity of women's creative work and have tended to confuse feminist art with, simply, women's art. Coward rejects this conflation of the two, and she suggests that the current popularity of 'women's fiction' is not necessarily feminist at all. Feminism, she argues, is an alignment of political interests and not a shared female experience; hence a tradition of women's art is of no particular importance.

This goes right to the nub of a number of controversial questions about feminism and culture. Is the recovery of women's artistic work of the past an integral part of our

developing feminist project, or merely a sentimental resuscitation of marginalia better left in the obscurity to which establishment criticism has consigned it? What do we gain by elevating traditional crafts such as embroidery and knitting to the status of art objects and hanging them in galleries? What is the meaning of an art exhibition where the objects displayed are kitchen utensils or the careful record of a child's upbringing? How should we react to art that claims to be based on a 'female language' or on an artistic rendering of the female body and genitalia? In what sense might these various imaginative comments on women's experience be seen as 'feminist' art? Is a work of art feminist because the artist says it is, or the collective who produced it announce their feminist principles of work?

These questions were crystallized for me in a thought-provoking way by Judy Chicago's exhibition *The Dinner Party*, and although this has not yet been shown in Britain I want to use it to illustrate some points. The leaflet accompanying the show states that '... the goal of *The Dinner Party* is to ensure that women's achievements become a permanent part of our culture', and the scale of the exhibition matches this monumental aspiration.

The central conception is a triangular dining-table, along the sides of which are placed symbolic representations of thirty-nine women: pre-Christian goddesses; historical figures such as Sappho and Boadicea; women like the suffragist Susan B. Anthony and the artist Georgia O'Keefe. (This dining-table echoes the 'last supper' so significant to our male-dominated Christian culture.) Each of the figures at the table has a place setting of a runner, cutlery, goblet and plate, whose different designs evoke her particular character. From these thirty-nine women the names of 999 less resoundingly famous, but still reasonably well-known, women radiate in inscriptions on the 'heritage floor'. Surrounding this central focus of the exhibition are banners designed for the entrance, documentation of the five year's work by Judy Chicago and her team of helpers, an exhibition of china-painting, and a display of congratulatory telegrams from feminist artists all over the world.

The size of the exhibition – completely devoted to women's achievements – is, literally, spectacular. When I saw it an entire

recognized as 'art'.

Third, I found the uncritical exercise of ranking 'great women' rather disturbing. There is something rather crude in deeming (to take some British examples of the figures used) the composer Ethel Smythe and the writer Virginia Woolf as worthy of individual places at the dining-table, while Jane Austen and Dorothy Wordsworth merit only an inscription on the floor. The heroines of feminism are here graded, ranked according to a set of criteria that are highly subjective. (On what grounds was it decided that Eleanor of Aquitaine made a greater contribution to feminism than the Virgin Mary? Is there not something bizarre in ranking Emily Dickinson with the Primordial Goddess?) The list of names in the catalogue is studded with epithets like 'pioneer', 'prizewinning', 'cultural leader' and 'eminent intellectual' - all of them terms of evaluation which we have developed a critical stance towards. The search for heroines and role models, for the great women of history, is one which raises a number of difficulties.

Finally, there are the problems surrounding how these women are represented in the exhibition. It is, perhaps, unsurprising and even appropriate that mythological goddesses are symbolized through renderings of clitoral and vaginal imagery. We have little to know them by. But for other women, of whose lives and beliefs we know far more (since they are historical rather than mythological figures), the inevitable vaginal imagery is less appropriate. Less appropriate! I was in fact horrified to see a 'Virginia Woolf' whose image to me represented a reading of her life and work which contradicted all she had ever stood for. There she sits: a genital sculpture in deep relief (about four inches high) resting on a runner of pale lemon gauze with the odd blue wave embroidered on it. Gone is Woolf's theory of androgyny and love of gender ambiguity; gone the polemical public voice; gone the complex symbolic abstractions of her writing. I found this exclusive emphasis on genitalia, and the sentimentality of the trappings, a complete betrayal - as was the 'Emily Dickinson' whose vagina is trimmed with a white lace effect over the palest pink. Very few of our celebrated sisters manage to escape this dreadful posthumous fate. Ethel Smythe appears here as a rather fine grand piano on a background of grey pin-stripe, but this, one

fears, is attributable to Chicago's perceptions of her as a dyke. It is in fact typical of Chicago's somewhat biologicistic approach to feminism that various of the protagonists are credited for creating a 'female form' of art or literature - in itself a controversial achievement since the possible existence of 'female' forms of art has yet to be established. The notion that some forms of art are intrinsically female (or male) is a dubious one.

All these reservations about *The Dinner Party* have a bearing on the problem of what can be said to be feminist art. This particular case is of interest in that Chicago's claims for the exhibition - that it serves her project of securing artistic recognition for women's achievements - crystallize one specific approach to feminist cultural politics. Her argument that women's art is systematically excluded from the artistic establishment is demonstrated by the fact that after an immensely popular American tour the show went into storage rather than on to Europe.

But problems still remain in (i) the difficulty of arriving at a consensus among feminists as to what constitutes 'feminist' art and (ii) the fact that the use of women's lives, histories and experience does not necessarily ensure the coherent, feminist, reading of Chicago's work that the artist appears to desire. In this sense the case of *The Dinner Party* does seem to me to illustrate the truth of Rosalind Coward's warning that women's art is not necessarily feminist art. Feminist art is not the same as any art which emphasizes women's experience. We cannot, however, completely separate feminist art from women's experience, and hence I would not go so far as Rosalind Coward when she writes:

Feminism can never be the product of the identity of women's experiences and interests - there is no such unity. Feminism must always be the alignment of women in a political movement with particular political aims and objectives. It is a grouping unified by its political interests, not by its common experiences (Coward, 1980:63).

Whatever the problems of basing feminism on the experience shared by women, far greater problems arise in attempting

completely to divorce feminism (as a political project) from women's experience. This leads to the position that women's shared experience of oppression plays no significant part in the construction of a feminist cultural politics, which in turn must lead to the conclusion that feminist art could equally well be developed by (for instance) a man. Although an emphasis on women's experience, or the fact of female authorship, or indeed a concern with the female body, is not enough to make a work of art feminist I do not see how feminism can ever take women to be a dispensable category. So although I agree that an emphasis on women is not a sufficient condition to make cultural production feminist it must at least be a necessary condition. Put another way, feminist art could be seen as a category within a tradition of women's art but I fail to see how it could be generated outside it. It may be that in general women's art is only indirectly useful or inspiring to feminism, but it is not possible to conceive of a feminist art that could be detached from a shared experience of oppression.

III. When is Culture 'Art'?

The third issue I want to take up is the rather thorny one of what we mean by 'art'. This is very difficult to approach in a direct way, since our ideas about art are profoundly influenced by, and entangled with, a particular historical conception of art which affects feminist as well as other types of thinking.

Elaine Showalter has pointed out that feminist criticism has tended to take two clearly identifiable paths (Showalter, 1979). She calls the first 'feminist critique' This is the study of woman as reader, and it concentrates on woman as a reader of male literature, emphasizing the sexist assumptions of that body of art. The second she calls 'gynocritics' the study of woman as writer in which we can explore the development of a female literary tradition. If this is an accurate account, which it probably is, then it reflects rather badly on feminist criticism. For it represents a way of looking at literature which completely separates the activity of reading (consumption) from that of writing (production). It assumes that art is produced by specialized individuals ('artists') and passively consumed by everyone else. This assumption is deeply engrained in our

culture. Our entire education system is based on the assumption (to simplify a little) that small children enjoy splashing about with paint, banging drums and writing stories, but that by the time we reach the end of secondary school we will have naturally separated into the uncreative majority and the few who go on to study or practise 'art'. For most adults the world of art is one which other people make for us – for our edification, enjoyment or entertainment. It comes as a shock to us to realize that in other cultures, and in our own in the past, art was not thought to be the province of particular individuals but was distributed more evenly across all social activity.

Without going into the question of how and why this specific social role of 'the artist' came about, it is clear that we have inherited a conception of art as something removed from other forms of social activity. Art is seen as the antithesis of work. It is mythologized as an oasis of creativity in the desert of alienated mass-production capitalism. It is idealized as the inspired product of a few gifted and privileged people, constructed on we know not what principles and existing in a kind of other-worldly limbo. It is credited with the ability to transcend the 'real world', lifting us into an arena of higher experience. Confronted with a 'masterpiece' we are to wonder, dumbly, at the unimaginable talent that went into making it. The viewer takes a humble distance from the artist.

To challenge these myths is to raise some interesting questions. If we reject the view that art is necessarily different from work we find ourselves considering afresh the ways in which artistic production may be akin to other forms of social production.

Janet Wolff, in *The Social Production of Art* (Wolff, 1981), argues that the work involved in producing an artistic or imaginative work is not essentially different from other forms of work. Marx's well-known remark on the difference between the worst of architects and the best of bees (that the former raises the structure in the imagination before starting to build) stresses the fact that human labour is based on the creative act of planning. It is only the degradation of work under capitalist relations of production, including the degree to which workers have been stripped of mental control over their labour, that makes us perceive such a huge gulf between work

and what we call 'creative' work.

Marxists working in the field of aesthetics have tried to develop an analysis of artistic production and, to a lesser extent, of distribution and consumption of art. One central question, however, tends to remain evaded or unsatisfactorily dealt with. This is the question of aesthetic value. I want to raise it again here because it has not yet been resolved in feminist thinking about art and we tend to operate with varying sets of assumptions on this question.

The problem posed by 'aesthetic value' is a very simple one: are some works of art 'better' than others and, if it is possible to say that they are, then how do we justify our judgements? Literary and art critics have been renowned for the ease, if not arrogance, with which they have presumed definitively to rank works of art or individual artists in levels of greatness. In a more everyday sense people will often confidently say that something is 'good', not necessarily linking this to whether they 'liked' the work in question or not. A high level of confidence in such judgements seems to have been common until well into this century, when this exercise came to be challenged seriously. The challengers have tended to criticize the assumption that 'aesthetic value' exists as a universal category, manifested as an intrinsic property of certain works of art, and have pointed to the political character of such judgements – they are biased towards the artistic production of dominant social groups. To recognize this is inevitably to cast suspicion on the objectivity and universality of the criteria used to rank art.

A number of possible arguments flow from this recognition.

1) The first would be to say that because judgements of aesthetic value have always been not merely culturally-bound but the expression of dominant groups within particular cultures we can therefore have no confidence in them at all. In a radical rejection of the claim that aesthetic value can be assessed objectively we can then arrive at the view that any art is as good as any other. The poem you scribble on the back of an envelope is every bit as good as the sonnet by D.H. Lawrence that F.R. Leavis admires.

2) A second response would be to argue that aesthetic value does exist as an objective category, and that our task is to remove political prejudice from its measurement. Our role is to

insist on the value of the work usually ignored or rejected by the critical establishment. Where they tend to value the work of the white, male bourgeoisie we must insist on the value of working class culture, or women's art, or black art. According to this view our task would be to struggle with the arbiters of aesthetic value and force them to assent to a high value being placed on excellent instances of minority culture. When the league-table of great artists is drawn up we want our candidates up there at the top.

3) A third possibility is to resolve the apparent conflict between aesthetic value and political value by attempting to construct an explicit relationship between the two – in essence, to argue that far from being divorced from political significance, aesthetic value should in fact be attributed on the basis of political progressiveness. Using this view rather loosely we could argue that feminism at present can and should regard art that is firmly located in women's experience and that points to a less oppressive future as of great value – as 'good' in a particular historical and political context.

None of these views is ultimately satisfactory though, and I think this is because they all evade the problem of how we can specify what really constitutes aesthetic value. The first view tends towards complete relativism – aesthetic value is merely judged according to political prejudice and is not a meaningful category – and leaves us with total inability to distinguish between a random scrawl and a finely-wrought painting that has moved generations of people. The second view is somewhat uncritical of existing criteria used for judging aesthetic value and in practice tends to lead towards unconvincing conclusions. Is it really only because of male dominance in art history that we think Rembrandt a 'better' painter than Angelica Kauffman, or because of patriarchal criticism that we find Stendhal a 'better' novelist than Marie Corelli? The third view evades the problem altogether, simply abandoning any notion of value which is independent of the political significance of the work at the time it was produced.

It might be possible to side-step some of these difficulties by asking a rather provocative question. Is it feasible to rehabilitate a category of objectively judged aesthetic value? The answer to this question could in fact be yes, and in

exploring this we might be able to consider afresh two problems raised by contemporary 'radical' approaches to art. These two problems are imagination and skill. Neglect of both of these, in feminist as in Marxist aesthetics, has led to some of the difficulties and confusions I have already touched on. So I want to put forward the proposition that skill and imagination have played a larger part in the construction of art than many radical critics have chosen to think.

We can think about the question of skill by referring back to the idea that artistic production is not essentially unlike other forms of social production. Now, although we know that social definitions of skill are the product of struggle (in that particular groups of workers have succeeded in achieving definition of their work as skilled while other groups doing similar work have lacked the bargaining power to do this), it cannot be denied that there is an objective element to skill. We can all recognize that a television engineer, a typesetter, a midwife, have skills that have been learnt. Similarly we grant that acting, stage design, pottery or tapestry are skilled crafts. The distinctions between 'work', 'craft' and 'art' are difficult to maintain when we consider the question of skill. We have little hesitation in attributing and estimating skill in work such as decorating, and the concept of craft is popularly identified with training and skill. Yet a curious indulgence sets in when we come to consider art – we are reluctant to see it in terms of the skills by which it was produced, partly no doubt because we are so badly-educated in art that often we cannot even assess the skills involved. We cannot see how a particular effect was achieved. Yet skill plays a central role in artistic production, and the most brilliantly imaginative idea will be frustrated if we lack the skill to execute and express it. There are many problems attached to assessing artistic skill, but we gain nothing by avoiding them and pretending that skill is not a crucial element in the production of art.

On the face of it there seems to be no need to point to imagination as a defining characteristic of art, since the popular view of art is to perceive it exclusively in these terms. Radical criticism has, however, tended to reject this view to the point of virtually denying the imaginative character of art. The everyday meaning of fiction (the antithesis to fact) is forgotten

by a radical aesthetics that has seen fiction as a descriptive category, like painting or sculpture. All too often fiction is treated solely in terms of the social reading we can make of it, the points where we can pin it down by its social or psychic determinants. This approach to fiction rests on a more or less crude application of sociological content analysis. In its more vulgar form it looks for the reflection in fiction of social fact, historical reality; in its more sophisticated form it sees fiction as a site in which various possible extra-textual elements can be located and dissected out. Yet in all this we often forget that fiction has a very oblique relation to the social reality to which we are trying to link it. This is precisely because fiction is an imaginative construction and is hence not a reliable indicator of social reality. We can never know exactly what relation a particular fictional work bears to the historical context of its production. Obviously to some extent, as Terry Eagleton points out, every work '... encodes within itself its own ideology of how, by whom and for whom it was produced' (Eagleton, 1976:48); but this should not lead us to believe that the only way in which we can relate to the work is by trying to decode it. Such decoding exercises may be very useful, but cannot ultimately provide all that we need to know about the work.

There is, then, something to be gained from rehabilitating what is currently thought of as a rather reactionary view of art. Within specific aesthetic forms and conventions we may be able to identify different levels of skill as well as the expression of particular fictional, or imaginative, constructions of reality. To point to this is not to slide into the individualistic romanticism of traditional bourgeois theories of art; it is merely to indicate the extent to which radical criticism has abandoned this dimension of art altogether.

To assert the possibility of critical and imaginative consciousness brings certain advantages to our thinking about art. It may, for instance, enable us not to separate so rigidly and disastrously the aspects of artistic production and consumption. For if we can identify levels of aesthetic skill in the construction of works of art, and the expression of critical and fictional representation of the world, it becomes clear that the reading of the work will inevitably depend upon the corresponding consciousness and knowledge of the audience.

the more we understand about the principles, and skills required, for the construction of particular works: the more completely we shall be able to receive them. The more we share, identify with, a particular consciousness of the world the more we shall enter into a fictional rendering of that consciousness. Hence the rehabilitation of a specifically aesthetic level of meaning may enable us to see why works of art cannot be understood either as intrinsically feminist (or anything else), or as necessarily carrying a meaning determined by the authors' intentions. The meaning they have is constructed in the consumption of them and it becomes impossible to separate the production of the work from its consumption.

What are the implications of this for feminist cultural politics? First, a priority would be to try and break down the idealization of the 'artist', which occurs as frequently in feminist culture as elsewhere. We need to reject the notion that women's liberation needs feminist artists to inspire us for more mundane struggles and move towards a greater acknowledgement of the reciprocal character of art in the social construction of political meaning. We need to work towards the creation of a cultural milieu in which feminist vision is creatively consumed as well as imaginatively produced. In this context an emphasis on aesthetic skills is in fact democratizing rather than elitist – for skills may be acquired, whereas the notion of an artistic 'genius' forbids the aspirations of anyone outside the small and specialized group. Differences in individual aptitude do not affect this generalization. Secondly, it suggests that we need to rethink our attitude towards the type of interventions currently being made in cultural politics. Two particular aspects of this will be taken up now, and they are the role of avant-gardism in feminist art, and the question of pleasure and the moralism surrounding it.

IV. Should Cultural Politics be Pleasurable?

The problem of avant-gardism can be put quite simply: given that there is a limited amount of energy available, should feminists be working at the frontiers developing new forms of expression or attempting to influence the mass media and reach a wider audience? The case for a feminist avant-garde appears

to me to rest on two propositions. The first is that feminism will not only inform what is said, but will inform *how* it is said and therefore new forms of expression must be created. In its strongest form this argument will tend to suggest that existing art forms are by nature male, or patriarchal, and that a women's language and style must be developed. The second proposition is that existing art forms tend to be supportive of the status quo and that there is something intrinsically radical about breaking with them. This view tends to hark back to the debates between the modernists and realists earlier this century, when modernists claimed that their insistent refusal to meet the reader's expectations, their intransigent denial of the anticipated structure and resolution of 'the story', was of itself revolutionary.

There are a number of limitations to both of these positions. For while it is true that there is a difference in what is represented in the cultural production of men and women, and the representation of gender in works of art tends in itself to be gendered by the author, it does not necessarily follow that the particular art forms or languages are intrinsically gendered. On the second point the arguments are more complex. The question as to whether rupturing the artistic status quo is necessarily progressive or revolutionary is a difficult one. This difficulty lies partly in the point made earlier on the active reception of the audience in setting cultural meaning. An innovatory piece of work may be experienced as such, or as startling, shocking, disturbing, if the audience is sufficiently familiar with the conventions it seeks to challenge and subvert. But is it necessarily significant in this respect when it is not perceived as such? This may depend upon our knowledge of the medium and the subtlety or otherwise of our response. I am aware, for example, that, while I can see for myself a departure from tradition in a contemporary novel, I have to be told by others that such and such a camera angle or style of shot constitutes a rejection of bourgeois practice in film-making. So the innovativeness depends at least to some degree on a relationship to knowledge of an earlier practice.

In so far as the claims to progressiveness of the avant-garde rest on arguments similar to those put forward by the modernists, they invite a similar question: avant-garde

(modernist) in relation to what? These are necessarily relative terms and we relate to the new on the basis of our experience of the old. I am not trying to suggest that experimental work is not important, merely arguing that, as with all forms of artistic production, it must be defined and limited by the audience receiving it at any particular time. In this sense there is not any significant difference between the processes involved in challenging the expectations of a minority audience of contemporary experimental film or music, and challenging the expectations of a very large television audience.

It follows from all this that a strong distinction between 'art' (with an experimental avant-garde) and 'the mass media' (with critical infiltration) is not altogether viable. In both cases the role of a critical political intervention is to challenge accepted conventions and representations and to offer a different consciousness of the world and how it might be changed. Given that there is this similarity, we perhaps pay insufficient attention to the political gains that might be made by a larger-scale challenge to the media. From the point of view of political strategy it could be profitable to question the emphasis on some of the more purist elements of feminist thinking on aesthetics. No doubt it is true that within radical cultural practice it is possible to pose more fundamental questions and proffer more profound transformations than within the media, but a small popular change is relatively just as significant as a large minority change. There may be at least as much potential for change in a tv soap opera as in agit-prop theatre. One reason why this has been somewhat neglected (and here I do want to be critical of a tendency within the avant-garde), is the prevalence of moralism. The mass media is often seen as inescapably locked in an illusory construction of pleasure – pleasure in a created complacency. Television and the popular cinema are seen as pandering to a reprehensible desire on the part of the audience for romance, violence, identification, a good yarn, an illusion of stability and closure. The denial of pleasure, the refusal to resolve ambiguity and conflict into consensus and conservatism, is a hallmark of the avant-garde. It has brought with it a moralistic purism, which I now want to discuss.

The question of pleasure is a particularly provoking one. In cultural politics it frequently surfaces as an irritation: *why do*

people enjoy things that are politically bad for them? Among feminists the problem is often acute. What is the nature of the illicit pleasure 'she' takes in a happy ending? Why do we still take pleasure in fashion magazines, or the dashing exploits of male heroes, or lyrical love songs, or blatant sentimentality? What meaning can we attach to these pleasures and our ambivalence about them?

The response of feminist critics and aestheticians has often been tinged with, not to say predicated upon, a form of moralism. No feminist could enjoy a book by Barbara Cartland or Norman Mailer and if you do then so much the worse for your feminism. Is your pleasure in Garbo or Fonda politically correct? Does it rest on the extent to which, for their time, they express a feminist point of view? Or something else not so worthy? Can you legitimate your ambivalent views on camp?

All this stems from a desire to reject a sexist culture and develop a feminist alternative. In the long run this moralism suffers from the limitations of all lifestyle politics. In the first place it requires such an investment of energy that the construction of an alternative within existing culture can sap the energy available for strategies directed at more fundamental changes. In the second place it can divert us from examining our own ambivalence and from understanding more about our pleasure. To refuse such an examination is utopian. Without sinking into total complacency we can try to get to grips with some aspects of pleasure. We have not only our own consciousness to consider. How can we widen the purchase of feminist ideas if we cannot understand why so many women read *Woman* and watch *Crossroads*?

Works such as Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* (1976) or Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) refer to the psychoanalytic tradition in search of an explanation of specific forms of aesthetic pleasure. It would be easy for exploration of such questions to lapse into subjectivism, and a strength of this approach is that its often fascinating insights are grounded in a theoretical framework that is susceptible to debate and discussion. But some difficulties remain. Laura Mulvey, for instance, demonstrates clearly the voyeurism of narrative film and the ways in which the female body has been objectified for male erotic

contemplation, and she concludes that radical film-makers can and should strike a blow against mainstream cinema. 'Women,' she writes, 'cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret.' (1975:18). Although this is couched as a likelihood it is in fact a hopeful injunction (not borne out by the ratings for Hollywood movies on the television). Indeed one of the reasons why narrative film is so popular, even among feminists, is that it provides the pleasure so forcibly denied in much radical film. Furthermore, the statement begs an important question which is particularly apposite to this case – what is the nature of the pleasure taken in, precisely, nostalgia and sentimentality? We need to know why the 'women's weepies' have an apparently enduring appeal. It is not enough to declare the impropriety of certain kinds of responses, we need to examine much more openly and sympathetically their basis in our consciousness and subjectivity.

Conclusion

I began by asking whether, as far as feminist cultural politics is concerned, there is a difference between a work of art and an advertising hoarding. It is often assumed that works of art are like other media of representation in that they are ideological. I have argued that there are dangers in a too extensive politicising of art as ideology: that we should not ignore the fictional, imaginative, aesthetic dimensions of works of art. In short, there are aspects of art that are not reducible to our analytic boxes of ideologies.

To say this is not to insist upon a distinction between popular culture and art. The myths about art and artists must be challenged. A work's status as 'art', and the intentions of 'the artist', do not of themselves construct the meaning of the work. This meaning is socially created in the consumption of the work. (In this sense, although I disputed the claims of *The Dinner Party* to be an intrinsically feminist work I would not dispute that it is a feminist event. But this is because its meaning has been constructed, collectively, as such.)

If we emphasize the social construction of meaning in this way, a rigid distinction between art and popular culture will

tend to fall away. It may be that works usually defined as art have a higher concentration of non-ideological elements than those thought of as popular culture, the media, or mass communications. But art does not have a monopoly on creativity, skill and imagination. Nor does it have a monopoly on the provision of pleasure. The conventions of particular art forms, through which aesthetic pleasure is mediated, have their counterparts in the conventions specific to particular forms of popular culture. The mechanical models of ideology, and the desperate resort to notions of 'false-consciousness', are adequate for understanding neither. Cultural politics, and feminist art, are important precisely because we are not the helpless victims of oppressive ideology. We take some responsibility for the cultural meaning of gender and it is up to us all to change it. But this struggle cannot rest on a challenge to ideological dimensions of the old-master painting – it will also have to engage with the aesthetic pleasures of advertisements.

This paper is based on a talk given at the Communist University of London, 1980. For comments on a written draft I would like to thank Rosalind Coward, Mary McIntosh, Kay Syrad, Michelene Wandor, Janet Wolff and the editors of this volume.

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'Mothers, Vote Labour!' The State, the Labour Movement and Working-Class Mothers, 1900-1918

Caroline Rowan

You may not know it, Baby dear, but the Great Ones of the land are thinking and talking of you today ... When they say 'Look after Baby!' they know not what that means. It means a new Britain, my kid, it means more room to live, more light, more air, more wages for your Mother and your Dad, it means a very different world from the world we're saddled with today (*Labour Woman*, September 1915).

These words were written by women in the Labour Party at a time when, with a few tentative reforms, the foundations were being laid for what we now know as the welfare state. The quotation illustrates the battle constantly being fought between classes over the form and content of welfare. To the 'Great Ones' of the land, it meant little more than education in the correct form of child-rearing. To the working-class authors of that article, it meant something much wider: access to material resources and an improvement in the quality of working-class life.

This dilemma is still with us today and features centrally in Marxist debates on the nature of the welfare state. The struggle between competing definitions illustrated in the above quotation makes it clear that accounts which see welfare as either serving the needs of capital (Saville, 1957), or as hard-won gains for the working-class (Thompson, 1958) are grossly oversimplified. More recent definitions, such as Poulantzas' account of the state as a 'point of condensation' whose form is determined by the balance of social forces in struggle

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