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The Demonization of Women in Popular Culture: Some Recent Examples

Ciaran McCullagh

Introduction

Until recently the study of popular culture was dominated by the perspective of the Frankfurt School. For them all mass culture was identical. Cultural products were 'cyclically recurrent and rigidly invariable types' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1977:352). They were the products of the 'assembly-line character of the culture industry' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1977:380). The similarities extended beyond plotlines and genre-types to the consistent promotion of conventional values. This culture was primarily a form of social control. It was, to quote De Tocqueville, 'a tyranny (which) leaves the body free and directs its attack at the soul' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1977:358).

However, contemporary analysts do not accept such a narrow and pessimistic view of popular culture. Douglas Kellner (1990), for example, argues that popular culture is best seen as an area of contest between a range of social perspectives. Conformist and traditional views no longer have the field to themselves. Artists and producers have been able to work within the confines of commercial culture to produce material that challenges dominant ideologies.

In the area of gender representation this has meant a greater sensitivity to gender issues and a widening in the range of such perspectives available. Women increasingly are being taken more seriously by film and television. Susanne Moore (Gamman and Marshment, 1990) has talked, for example, about the renegotiation in the portrayal of both male and female bodies in popular culture. Others have discussed how MTV has been forced to include tough women performers, such as Cyndi Lauper, Madonna and Tina Turner, who set out to challenge male ideologies about gender relations (Lewis, 1990). Steven Spielberg's film of *The Colour Purple*, for all its faults, does attempt to deal with the sexual politics, the sexual violence, the issue of female bonding and the lesbian relationship at the heart of Alice Walker's novel (for a discussion see Bobo, 1988). These, in some sense, may be small steps. Writers like Gillian Dyer (1987), for example, argue that they are. But in another sense they are a considerable advance from the time Sam Goldwyn wanted to film Lillian Hellman's stage play, *The Three Sisters*. He was told he could not as a number of the central characters were lesbian. His response: 'No problem, we'll make them Albanians'.

If popular culture is an area of contest, then it is essential to keep one's eye on the players. The purpose of this paper is to document the re-emergence of an old player now apparently getting his second wind in the more welcoming climate of the 1980s and early 1990s. This player had previous successes after the second World War. He won the battle for the shape of popular culture's depiction of women in the 1950s. Under his influence they were either absent altogether or restricted to the domestic sphere. But he was assumed to have been seen off in the more enlightened climate of the 1960s and 1970s.

The 1980s, however, have been a different story. In the United States in particular there has been a concerted attempt to recreate a conservative hegemony, through the 'release' of the corporate sector from the restrictions of government regulation, through the 'rolling back' of an already inadequate welfare state and through the attempt to reinstate so-called traditional values at all levels of the cultural structure (see Kellner,

1990). This latter element has manifested itself in popular culture's representation of women. It has produced a backlash against, what Elizabeth Traube (1991:19) terms, the 'imagined threat of female power'. This time the source of the threat has become more focused and the victim of the backlash has become more specific. The victim has become the single, independent, career-minded woman and the focus of media representations has been on the degree to which 'unlimited ambition' in such women is a source of problems and is 'a threat requiring either their subordination to the appropriate men or their expulsion from the imagined community' (Traube, 1991:2).

The Evidence Assembled

The reality of 'the anti-feminist fight back' (Smith, 1989:30) in popular culture can be documented by considering a number of recent successful films and by a look at two television series, one of which was seen as the flagship of the women's movement into mainstream television, *Cagney and Lacey*. The other is *thirtysomething*. The films are *Presumed Innocent*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Jagged Edge*, *Basic Instinct* and *Cape Fear*.

(i) The Cinema

Let us begin with *Presumed Innocent*. The film is based on the highly successful novel of the same name. Harrison Ford plays the main character, a prosecuting lawyer in a large American city. His boss is up for re-election when a colleague of Ford's, a woman, is found raped and murdered. At her funeral she is described as a very good lawyer. Although Ford had an affair with the murdered woman in the past he is chosen to investigate the crime. He later ends up being charged with it. As the film unfolds we find out that almost everyone, from the prosecuting attorney to the cop on the street, is corrupt. The judge hearing the case, for example, was involved in a bribery scandal with the murdered woman and also had an affair with her. The case against Ford collapses when his defending counsel indicates to the judge that he will introduce evidence about both of these matters.

Ford returns home and finds evidence that his wife is the murderer. By the nature of his profession, he is under a legal obligation to report offences and offenders to the police. But instead in this case he does nothing. He simply separates from his wife, at her insistence and not his. His best friend, depicted in the film as an honest and reliable police investigator and under the same legal imperatives as Ford, approaches him. He says that he withheld evidence from the court that could have had damaging consequences for Ford. He gives it to him and Ford throws it off the ferry on which they have been meeting. On that note the film ends.

But ask yourself, why does all of this happen, why do good men go bad, why do they get involved in legal evasions and in corruption? Joan Smith (1989) argues that what you find at the centre of the story producing all the mayhem and disorder is an attractive, glamorous, single and successful career woman. She is presented as hungry for power and ambitious for promotion. Her means of achieving these is to exchange them for sexual favours. She has slept with nearly every man in the story. It is these sexual couplings that provoke and deepen the corruption in which the men subsequently get involved. The real theme of the film, Smith argues (1989:34), is that 'women's power is always achieved illegitimately and at the expense of men'. But such power and success has a price. 'Female intrusion into public life — into male areas of life — inevitably brings with it the risk that violence will ensue'. It is in this respect that the moral resolution in the film is significant. The format of the film is that of a conventional crime story. So we expect that in the end justice will be done and the killer punished. Yet in this film the unexpected seems to happen. The apparent culprit, Ford's wife, is not punished. The reason is simple. She is presented as not really being at fault. She has been the victim of the other woman's ambitions. The real culprit and the cause of all

the trouble is the dead woman. Her crime is to interfere in the world of men and her punishment is to be killed.

The same theme of the demolition of the independent, single woman is at the centre of *Jagged Edge*. It opens with the horrific murder of a woman. A newspaper editor, played by Jeff Bridges, is charged with the crime. The victim, it turns out, is his wife. We are then introduced to a professional and highly regarded corporate lawyer who is also a woman. After some hesitation, she agrees to defend him. When we meet her first she is dressed in a business-like fashion and she is established as being good at her job. However once established in this way the film then proceeds to systematically undermine her. Her professional judgement is the first thing to go. Her male colleagues know, from their experience of the criminal world, that Bridges is guilty. By contrast she chooses to defend him not because she knows he is innocent but because she feels he must be.

Her reputation slips from there on. Within a short period she is in bed with Bridges, somewhat unprofessional conduct even for a lawyer. She is also shown as a bad mother, too caught up with her lover's defence to help her children with their school work. But the full extent of her underlying stupidity is not revealed until the end. She gets Bridges off on the murder charge. She spends the night with him, though it is not clear if this is in lieu of a fee or not. Next morning she discovers evidence that proves he did commit the crime. The men were right all along. A woman's feelings had yet again betrayed her.

In this situation the obvious response would be to contact the police. Instead she rushes home and has a shower. Bridges rings her. Rather than stalling him she indicates that she has found the evidence against him. At this point a call to the police would definitely have been appropriate. Instead she goes to bed and with her hair wet too. Sure enough he comes along to kill her but she produces a gun and kills him. She then falls into another man's arms for the traditional concluding cuddle. It is, after all, tough when you meddle in a man's world.

And then there is *Fatal Attraction*, or as Julie Burchill (1992) refers to it, 'Foetal Attraction': Here, a cool, efficient, professional woman has a one-night stand with the male character, played by Michael Douglas. The experience is undermining. She cannot live with Douglas' rejection of her and comes after him and his family. The contrast between the real woman, Michael Douglas's wife, played by Anne Archer and the dangerously unstable career woman, played by Glenn Close, is highlighted throughout the film. Consider, for example, the backgrounds against which the two women are filmed. His wife is backlit by warm fires and cosy domestic colours. The other woman lives in a converted warehouse in the meat market area of New York. The predominant colours and texture are grey and steely. Neighbourhood lighting consists of fires in oil drums, a visual hint of a witch's cauldron. The contrast is also dramatized by the names they are given. The 'real' woman is called 'Beth', the warmer and more user-friendly diminutive of formal and slightly distant 'Elizabeth'. The 'unstable' woman by contrast is given a name, Alex, that is cold and that does not even immediately identify her as a woman.

However the real undermining is at the climax of the film. Here the earlier visual hint of the connection between the professional woman and a witch is made explicit. The test for a witch was immersion in water. If you stayed down you were not a witch. You drowned but at least you went to heaven. If you came up out of the water you were a witch and they burned you. This process solved the problem for society but its benefits to accused women were less apparent. At the end of the film Douglas drowns Glenn Close in the bath and, satisfied with a job well done, turns his back on her. She rises up out of the water with a knife to kill him. She is stopped by Douglas's wife who shoots her dead. The film finishes with a soft focus shot of a photograph of the family, now restored to its oneness. In the end the point in *Fatal Attraction* is, as Susan Faludi (1992:152) puts it, 'the best single woman is a dead one'.

What is interesting is that the producers of this film intended it to have a feminist message. If so they went about making it in a most peculiar way. The director they chose was Adrian Lynne, one of whose previous claims to directorial elegance was the film *9½ Weeks*. This was based on a book of the same name which is a fictionalized account of a woman's decline into sadomasochism. In the book and in the film script, the story ends with the woman walking away from the relationship and seeking help. Lynne, according to Susan Faludi (1992:148), 'tried to change the ending so that she winds up learning to love the abuse'. It took a protest by women working on the film to prevent this. The casting of Michael Douglas in a film that was presumed to have a feminist message was also, to put it at its most discrete, unusual. He is on record as saying that he was irritated by feminism. 'If you want to know', he told a reporter, 'I'm really tired of feminists, sick of them....Guys are going through a terrible crisis right now because of women's unreasonable demands' (quoted in Faludi, 1992:151).

However, the group blamed for the purging of the original feminist message was the audience on whom the film was pre-tested. They did not like the original ending so it was changed at a cost of \$1.3 million. But what was so feminist about the original ending? In it the same sequence of events unfolds but instead of Glenn Close being killed she commits suicide. It takes considerable skill and expertise to construe this ending as a feminist message. That single independent women should be presented as resolving difficult situations in their lives by killing themselves is hardly a positive endorsement of their lifestyle.

Michael Douglas, perhaps not surprisingly, also features in another recent film *Basic Instinct* which among its other problems reintroduces into mainstream popular culture the idea of the 'permissible' rape. A key scene in the film is an encounter in a bar where Douglas is taunted by another white male police officer. He leaves and goes back to her apartment with a woman psychiatrist who is shown earlier in the film to be calm, professional and single. Here despite the fact that she clearly says 'no', she is brutally raped. She is later shown as colluding in it when the two are seen in bed calmly discussing the murder he is investigating. The rape is also retrospectively justified by the fact that she turns out to be the killer or at least she may have been. The 'invisibility' of the rape is neatly illustrated in *Sight and Sound*, a film review magazine, where, in describing the plot of the film, it says that Douglas 'sleeps with the police psychologist assigned to be his therapist' (Hoberman, 1992:4).

The final film is *Cape Fear* which is, as Pam Cook (1992: 15) says, 'a violent rape film in which women apparently collude in their own punishment at the hands of a rapist'. The female characters seem to attract and almost welcome their own humiliation. This is particularly the case where Lori Davis, a mistress of the lawyer that Cady comes back to avenge himself against, is raped but where the rape begins as seduction. She acts the role of promiscuous woman and she is presented as 'asking for it'. She gets it in the end but not in the form that she anticipated. The implication for women is that they are open to seduction by potential rapists and so are contributors to their own humiliation. They are in effect the cause of their own victimization. This film was released in a year in which two major rape trials were going on in the United States and in which the defence case was that the alleged victims encouraged the subsequent sexual assault.

It is interesting in this respect to compare the recent version of *Cape Fear* with the original 1961 version. There are a number of differences, for example, in the portrayal of the Bowden family. The earlier version had them as the ideal united family and as fighting the threat from outside represented by Cady. The later version has the family in a mess. The wife is bitter, disaffected and not supportive of her husband. The husband is having an affair. The daughter, it is suggested, is recovering from a drug problem. She responds to the atmosphere in the household by retreating to her bedroom with MTV, her radio and her Swatch telephone. But, for our present purposes, the most significant change is in the portrayal of Cady's violence against women. The earlier version presents it as unmitigated and unquestioned evil. There is simply no room for doubt about the violence that he inflicts on his victims and there is no indication of any collusion on the

part of his victims.

(ii) Television

The issue of the change in the representation of women in popular culture is not restricted to the cinema. Most of the fictional material on the television comes from the United States. It is very much in the nature of the television industry there that it originates very little new material itself. The pressure to capture audience share is simply too great for any chances to be taken. The strategy of producers is to look to what has already been successful, either on other television channels, as books or in the cinema, and recycle it. It is thus not surprising that they rapidly began to incorporate this new image of women into the material they produced. The two most striking examples of this are *Cagney and Lacey* and *thirtysomething*.

Cagney and Lacey is generally seen as significant in the history of gender representation in popular culture. The programme was unique in a number of respects. It was 'the first dramatic narrative programme in television history to star two women' (D'Acci, 1987:204). It challenged gender roles and the conventions of the 'buddy' movie genre by casting two women as tough professional cops. Cagney was shown as having an active sex life which at that time was unusual for a single woman on network television. Lacey was shown as the main income-earner in her household. When her husband was unemployed he was shown minding the children and cooking the meals. Representatives of the women's movement in the US actively promoted the early episodes of the show. Gloria Steinem, for example, appeared on talk shows to promote it and was scheduled to play a small part in one episode of the programme. A key part of its target audience was clearly female. This can be seen in the range of topics dealt with in the programme such as rape, sexual discrimination in the work place and child abuse, and in the strategies that were used to disturb male viewers like the mocking of the machismo of the male characters.

Thus, it is an important programme for the study of gender representations in the media and the development of the programme is of particular interest for the concerns being discussed here. Initially there was a balance in the representations of the lives of the two women and much of the dramatic tension derived from the contrast between the two. But as the programme proceeded there was a change in the portrayal of the characters and the lifestyles that they represented. It came increasingly to favour the traditional family of Lacey and her husband, Harvey, as the more acceptable and satisfactory norm for women. This can be seen most clearly in the disintegration and eventual destruction of Christine Cagney. The message again is that the single life, and the desire of single women to participate as equals in a man's world, is a dangerous one for women. In this case the danger is posed by alcoholism.

Alcock and Robson (1990) have developed this argument by looking at a number of episodes of the penultimate series. In one episode they show how Cagney is established as a strong independent character who both desires and is desirable to men. This happens when a gun-collector visits the police station to report the theft of one of his guns. The gun-collector flirts with her, tells her that firing an automatic weapon 'is pretty exciting stuff. Another female cop says 'I like a man that's heavily armed'. She is put in charge of the gun-check in the precinct. Most of the men are careless with the rules about guns, the symbol of their power, and they resent her attempts to make them aware of this. Lacey, by contrast, is mindful of guns and of her body. She wears a bulletproof vest as the rules stipulate. Cagney does not. She sees it as indicating vulnerability – the men don't so why should she? – and as undermining her sexuality.

Her father tells her that she looks pregnant in it.

When they go after the gun thief Lacey is shot. Cagney feels guilty about this for two reasons. Firstly, the gun used is one stolen from the gun collector with whom she had been flirting. Secondly, she realizes if she had been shot, she would be dead. Lacey is wounded but alive because she followed the rules, accepted her vulnerability as a woman and wore her bulletproof vest. Cagney is unable to deal with this. She is unwilling to acknowledge her vulnerability and responds by turning to drink and the process of her disintegration begins.

It continues in later episodes when Lacey rescues a baby from a burning car. She is praised for it by her male colleagues and her family. As her reputation rises, Cagney by contrast is on the way down helped in no small measure by the pressures of her father Charlie, whom she is unwilling to acknowledge is an alcoholic. He dies, hitting his head in a drunken fall. She refuses to accept that this happened because he was drunk. Her inability to deal with the domestic is developed in scenes about the funeral. Her brother flies in from California. His view of family life differs from hers. He defends the mother, she the drunken father. She has a difficulty with mothers. Lacey's rescue of the child leads to Cagney calling her, in a sarcastic vein, 'mother of the decade'. The search for the real mother of the child leads to several false ones coming forward. This makes Cagney angry at all 'these mothers' and their need for children. She is shown as uneasy among families. She abruptly leaves each of the homes she stays in after her father's death - Lacey's which she leaves in the middle of the night and her brother's in California.

Lacey gets promoted for rescuing the child while Cagney continues to drink heavily. She misses her partner's promotion party because she is drunk. It is Lacey in her mothering role who eventually sorts out the mess of her life. Cagney's problem, Alcock and Robson (1990) argue, is presented as the failure to acknowledge her vulnerability as a woman in a man's world, her failure to appreciate the role of the family and her failure to acknowledge the comforts and necessity of domesticity. These failures lead to alcoholism. The solution is for her to acknowledge them. What she has to be helped to do is to recognize her vulnerability as a single woman. This is what Lacey eventually does for her. As Alcock and Robson (1990:52) tell us, 'it is within the confines of the Lacey universe that Cagney realizes she must reside; no more breaking the rules... As such, Mary Beth is the agent of patriarchy who drags Christine back to the straight and narrow'. This solution requires her demise as a single, independent woman.

Once the character of Cagney was broken in this way, the dramatic tension on which the series depended was dissolved. The programme survived another season on network television in the United States. The ultimate indignity was in the last episode. Cagney and Lacey are shown under siege in a farmhouse. Their lives are in danger. They need help. It comes in the form of car loads of men, restoring the 'natural' order of television which says that women must always be rescued by men.

The centrality of the domestic to the lives and to the self-realization of women is taken further in *thirtysomething*. This was released on network television in the United States in 1987. It was promoted as a realistic drama and as 'thinking' people's television (Faludi, 1992:194-202). The American Psychological Association encouraged this perception by giving the show an award for promoting 'inner thinking'. More cynical commentators explained this by saying that viewers were more likely to try therapy after watching the programme.

The characters of the women range from the blissfully happy to the spectacularly unhappy, a range which finds at the happy end the woman who gives up her career to

raise her children and at the unhappy end a single career woman. The happy domesticated woman is given the name 'Hope'. The ambitious single woman, by contrast, is called Ellyn. She is shown as an irritable, stressed, unloved and unlovable person. She lives in an apartment that makes that of Alex in *Fatal Attraction* seem positively homely. Her stomach is in a dreadful state, she has bags under her eyes from working late and she is allergic to small babies. The producers of the show considered making her a drug addict or giving her a nervous breakdown but they felt this was too drastic. They compromised by giving her a bleeding ulcer. Her boyfriend leaves her because he says that she is self-destructive. She ends up back in her parent's house in her old bedroom with her teddy-bears and cuddly toys. The effect of domesticity is immediate. She realizes the error of her ways, reaches for the phone and rings a psychiatrist, a male one of course.

Susan Faludi (1992:197) argues that a key episode in the series was one called 'Weaning'. In this, Hope returns to her old job on a part-time basis because, unusually for television characters, the family are having money troubles. She finds the job exhausting. Her husband's response to her tiredness is revealing. He says 'We used to be madly in love'. She says, 'it won't always be like this' and he responds 'yeah, it will probably be worse'. Being madly in love and having a full-time job is not a problem for a man. Being in love and keeping down a part-time job is, however, beyond the wit of a woman.

In the job she comes across a career-minded woman. She asks the woman if she wants children. The woman says that she does not have time for a relationship at the moment. This remark could have created the dramatic space within which the issue of the obstacles to the career advancement of women could have been dramatized. It is not taken. Instead Hope leaves her work and rushes home to her husband. She tells him that she cannot manage the two jobs, again creating dramatic space for a discussion of the burden of the 'double-day' faced by working women. Instead he says that he knows it is not politically correct but he would prefer her at home also. The episode ends with Van Morrison singing 'She's an angel' as Hope dances around the nursery with the child in her arms.

Concluding Discussion

The argument of this paper has been that the last few years have seen a new and significant trend in the depiction of women in popular culture. This is the representation of the domestic as the most suitable for women and the portrayal of ambition and independence in single professional women as a danger to society and to the women themselves. It is not being suggested that this is the only image of women available in popular culture but the trend documented here has, nonetheless, become a prominent one. Its significance is that it calls into question any presumption that the misogyny behind these depictions of women has become a thing of the past. It continues to be a potent factor in popular culture. The scale of the problem can be illustrated by looking at the film that was presented as having the most positive feminist message in the late 1980s. This was *The Accused*. That a film which suggests that rape is a crime of violence, that rape victims deserve sympathy and that women have the right not to be raped should be seen as a 'daring feminist statement' is, as Susan Faludi (1992:170) says, a depressing indication of 'how much ground women have already lost'.

Two final issues remain to be addressed. The first is that all of the films and television shows examined in this article are American and reflect American (male) cultural and sexual preoccupations. So it could be objected that the analysis here has little relevance to Ireland. Yet we must take account of the fact that all of them have

been very successful in Ireland. All of the films, for example, did well in the cinema here. Two of them – *Basic Instinct* and *Cape Fear* – were the most popular video rentals from Extravision in 1992. Against this kind of background we do need to consider whether there are sufficient strong, well produced, well presented and well marketed countervailing images of women in popular culture in Ireland to counteract the effects of imported representations.

The second issue is the matter of audiences. We have suggested here that certain films and television shows carry a particular image of the single woman and of the ideal life-style for women in general. Yet, much recent audience research suggests that the images and interpretations that producers and directors incorporate into their work are not necessarily those which audiences take (for a discussion, see Kelly, 1991). It is, according to this research, no longer possible to assume that the dominant meaning in media products is accepted by the audience. The audience, it is claimed, is capable of 'resisting' the meaning in the text. This raises the question of whether the films and programmes analyzed here are seen and understood by audiences in the critical way in which this article has suggested that they should be or whether they are understood in the way their makers intended. To put it simply, can we assume that audiences see the deep misogyny that permeates these films and shows?

There are a number of reasons to argue that they do not. One is that while it is the case, as Fiske (1987) has suggested, that programmes like the news do not have a narrative structure which is powerful enough to shape our understanding of the issues, the same is not true of films in particular. Here the narrative structure is stronger, more unified, more coherent and less open to the fragmentation to which other forms of media are susceptible. Hence films are likely to be more influential on audience attitudes and understandings than are television programmes like the news. It is also true, as Condit (1989:112) has argued, that 'audiences do not have the resources on which resistive practices depend'. These include the time and energy to construct alternative interpretations. If these require a lot of work then 'the tendency of such burdens is', as Condit (1989:109) puts it, 'to silence viewers'.

Moreover, viewers' ability to offer opposed readings depends to a considerable extent on the degree of access they have to sources of oppositional interpretations. As a result, examples of successful oppositional decoding are more limited than is often suggested. They tend to be confined to audiences that are relatively advantaged in relation to the content of the media message. Thus, in Morley's (1980) research the shop stewards with their links to the trade union movement could produce alternative interpretations of the *Nationwide* programme a lot easier than the shop-floor workers. Finally, viewers' abilities to produce alternative interpretations is constrained by cultural practices in relation to viewing. Constructing an alternative reading generally requires a number of viewings of a film or television programme. Academics may do this but most viewers do not. From their point of view once the ending of a film is known there is little to be gained from looking at it a second time.

All of this means that the issues of the content and the power of popular culture are still highly relevant topics. The power of television and film lies in its ability to 'make present in public' (Condit, 1989:113) particular accounts and interpretations of events, issues and people in society. Even if these are not accepted by audiences their presence gives them status, importance and validity. Hence the way in which television and film address issues like that of gender continues to be important. It legitimates particular points of view simply by giving 'presence to their codes' (Condit, 1989:114). This means that if such misogynistic presentations of women continue to have such a central place in our culture it should be a matter of concern to us.

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