

In defence of reading (and watching) trash: Feminists reading the romance

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Deborah Philips** 

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Abstract

In *Cultural Populism*, Jim McGuigan argues that in British cultural studies ‘there is populist sentiment, but hardly any “sentimentality” is discernible’. There is, however, an arena of British cultural studies that has always been concerned with ‘sentiment’ and that is the romance narrative. This article argues that the study of popular fictions has always been integral to the history of cultural studies, and that it established a site in which feminist voices would make gender politics intrinsic to the field. At a time when gender was not a central issue for either Literature or Cultural Studies, generic fictions written by and for women provided a site for research that was undeniably about female experience, and the analysis of those texts offered a strategy for asserting a feminist focus.

Keywords

Feminism, literature, popular fiction, romance, women’s writing

In *Cultural Populism*, Jim McGuigan (1992) argues that in British cultural studies ‘there is populist sentiment, but hardly any “sentimentality” is discernible’ (p. 13). There was then, in 1992, and there remains now, an arena of British cultural studies that has always been concerned with ‘sentiment’ – and that is the domestic romance narrative. McGuigan does go on to acknowledge, in a footnote, ‘The study of women’s reading of romance fiction has been one of the most fiercely debated and productive topics in feminist cultural studies (McGuigan, p.168)’, but that is where he leaves romance, as a footnote. There is a blind spot in McGuigan’s account of the development of cultural studies, in that he acknowledges but does not fully integrate the challenge of a feminist gender

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analysis to that history.¹ *Cultural Populism* underestimates the numerous ways in which feminist scholars set out both to question a traditional canon and to open up cultural analysis to perspectives beyond those based on the primacy of class. The study of popular fictions has always been integral to the development of cultural studies, and the analysis of romance fiction and television soap opera established spaces in which feminist voices made gender politics intrinsic to the field.

Popular fictions addressed to an audience of women offer an arena in which the representation of gender is central, and it is a largely female critical space. The study of the romance is a particularly female field; the romance genre is one that men on the whole do not read, nor do they write (as far as can be known) popular sentimental fictions, and few men have analysed them. Claud Cockburn (1972) had already recognised in 1972 that the romance novel (as it continues to do) inevitably addresses gender politics and the ‘woman question’:

The bestsellers are, of course, rich sources of information regarding what may be called, for very rough convenience, the ‘private sector’ of life and love, notably love, and spilling over from there to cover the general status of women. (p. 14)

That focus on ‘the private sector of life and love’ has consistently meant that the genre of romance ranks lowest in any hierarchy of popular fictions, as both Gerry Palmer and Clive Bloom pointed out in their studies of bestsellers (see Bloom, 2002, and Palmer, 1978). As Bloom put it in 2002, ‘Popular genres . . . do not have equal status. Some are considered more serious than others (which often means less female or less “juvenile”) . . .’ (p. 14). That generic inequality remains the case; romance fiction and soap opera are the most despised forms of culture and, not coincidentally, those most associated with women.

Tania Modleski (1982) made it clear in 1982 how strongly the hierarchy of genres is gendered; she argued, in terms which continue to resonate, that at the point when cultural studies was beginning to be established in the academy texts addressed to a female audience were largely neglected by critics:

Although Harlequin/romances, Gothic novels, and soap operas provide mass(ive) entertainment for countless numbers of women . . . very few critics have taken them seriously enough to study them in any detail. The double critical standard, which feminists have claimed biases literary studies, is operative in the realm of mass-culture studies as well . . . At a time when courses on popular culture have become semirespectable curricular offerings in the universities, one is often hard put to find listed on the syllabi a single novel, film or television program which makes its appeal primarily to women. (p. 11)

Richard Dyer, Terry Lovell and Jean McCrindle presented a paper at the 1977 Edinburgh International Television conference (which McGuigan attended, McGuigan, 1992: 143) in which they argued that their concern with soap opera was precisely because its appeal was ‘primarily to women’, as ‘the only form of television drama that has been traditionally defined as drama for women, and about women and watched by women’ (Dyer et al., 1981: 35), and because it was a form that was not taken seriously: ‘We wanted to study soap opera precisely because it *is* popular, it *is* for and about women, it

is *not* prestigious . . .’ (Dyer et al., 1981: 37). McGuigan (1992) does acknowledge the paper as ‘seminal’ (and included it in his co-edited reader *Studying Culture*, McGuigan and Gray, 1997), but he is scathing and dismissive of the argument: ‘their own position could . . . be construed as internally contradictory and inconsistent, displaying the problem of holding together a notion of ideological effect with an appreciation of popular pleasure, typical of the field of study’ (p. 143).

McGuigan reserves his most withering scorn in *Cultural Populism* for Dorothy Hobson’s work on soap opera, stating, ‘few (critics) are as unreflexive about the genre as Dorothy Hobson’ (McGuigan, 1992: 145). Hobson wrote one of the earliest studies of the form, *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*, in 1982, at the Centre for Cultural Studies. *Crossroads*, at the time, was the most denigrated programme on television. Soap opera itself, like domestic romance, is a reviled form, as Lovell (1981) put it in 1981 (in a phrase which McGuigan uses verbatim), it is a ‘genre which is ghettoised and despised by media workers, intellectuals, and men generally’ (p. 51). McGuigan is dismissive of the enterprise of analysing such a ‘ghettoised’ form, but he does not interrogate whether that marginalisation might itself be a consequence of its gendered place in culture.

Feminists at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham were at times challenging the gender bias in cultural studies, focussing their attention on forms of popular culture which appealed to women. Angela McRobbie, at the Birmingham Centre in the early 1970s, experienced much the same ‘double critical standard’ that Modleski cites and describes a double sense of marginalisation, working as a woman academic and in a despised field:

We were a bit isolated up there in the Muirhead Tower.² There were no women’s studies jobs to apply for, and as women we were certainly aware that the kind of academic work we were engaged in was bound to appear illegitimate. So perhaps our lack of ambition was also a protective mechanism which masked a pervasive unconfidence on the basis that on a wide number of fronts we remained far removed from the traditional pathways of academia. (McRobbie, 2000: 215)

Charlotte Brunson (2000), a contemporary of McRobbie in the Muirhead Tower, wrote in the same year of a similar sense of marginalisation; she describes,

. . . the contradictory position of feminist intellectuals in the late 1970s and 1980s, whose academic training permits entry to the predominantly masculine academy, but whose origins, gender-formation and the discrimination they meet, return them endlessly to that which has been forbidden, disavowed, or abandoned – the pleasures, concerns and accoutrements of femininity. (pp. 4–5)

Much of the early feminist work on the analysis of popular fictions was undertaken by women in the Muirhead Tower in Birmingham, or in organisations associated with the Centre, who collectively established the study of popular texts for women audiences as a central field within cultural studies.

The earliest woman to focus attention on popular fiction in the academy was Queenie Leavis (1932), who published *Fiction and The Reading Public* in 1932, in which she proclaimed the need for ‘a kind of interest in fiction that I feel to be of great urgency’

(p. xiii). Although she was no fan of popular culture Leavis (1932) does try to take her authors and texts seriously, declaring, 'To be brightly ironical at the expense of bestsellers would no doubt be easy but to yield to such an unprofitable temptation is not part of the present writer's undertaking' (p. 41). Trained as she was by I.A. Richards, the father of Practical Criticism, she is careful to undertake close reading, a methodology that later feminist critics would employ, although their practice was shaped by Barthes rather than Richards.

McGuigan (1992) does not cite Q.D. Leavis directly in *Cultural Populism*, but he does reference her husband, F.R. Leavis, noting that 'the strategy advocated by the Leavisites did have the distinct virtue of at least putting the products of the modern media on the curriculum, albeit once there only to be derided by the all-knowing teacher' (p. 46). McGuigan (1992) argues that his own mission in *Cultural Populism* is a concern to account for what he terms 'populist impulses' (p. 29), a charge that he clearly levels at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

A serious attention to popular fiction was there from the Centre's beginnings; among the seven projects first proposed for research at the Centre was 'Levels of Fiction and Changes in Contemporary Society' (McGuigan, 1992: 51). Richard Hoggart, the first Director of the Centre for Cultural Studies from 1964, had published *The Uses of Literacy* in 1957, with a subtitle indicating a particular attention to fiction: 'Aspects of working-class life with special reference to publications and entertainments'. As Dyer points out, Hoggart's focus on domestic and community life 'meant a stress on women' (Dyer et al., 1984: 3); the 'publications' Hoggart discusses include those written for women; a small section of *The Uses of Literacy* is devoted to 'Peg's Paper', a term Hoggart (1976) uses to indicate the more old fashioned forms of magazine serial romance fiction:

. . . it is commonly thought that some magazines . . . those predominantly read by working-class women and usually spoken of as 'Peg's Paper and all that' – provide little other than undiluted fantasy and sensation. This is not true . . . They are in some ways crude, but often more than that; they still have a felt sense of the texture of life in the group they cater for. (p. 121)

McGuigan's reading of *The Uses of Literacy* does not discuss *Peg's Paper* at all. While Hoggart does invoke *Peg's Paper* and its ilk as examples of a more 'authentic' working-class culture than the 'candy-floss world' (as the title of one of the chapters has it) of mass market publications, there is nonetheless a real recognition of the way in which popular fictions can engage with the lived experience of women readers, an argument that Modleski would make almost three decades later. In his attention to the tropes of the magazine serial romance, Hoggart does treat them with some respect. Hoggart's study of 'family serials and feature programmes' on the radio laid the groundwork for future work on radio and television soap operas, (much of it later undertaken by feminists at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies³).

Stuart Hall, who would become Hoggart's successor as the Director of the Birmingham Centre, published, with Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* in 1964. As educators themselves (Hall had taught in a Secondary Modern school and in Further Education, and Whannel was then Education Officer at the British Film Institute), Hall and Whannel pick up on the Leavisite call for the education of taste; their book is, as was Leavis'

*Culture and Environment*⁴, directed at teachers. Hall, like Hoggart, had studied English Literature at the moment of *Scrutiny*,⁵ and both would have been trained in the Leavisite and I.A. Richards' approach to the analysis of literary texts. Their approach is more nuanced and egalitarian, however, than either Leavis; they find Queenie's call for resistance by 'an armed and conscious minority' 'too limiting a view – especially for those who teach the majority school population' (Hall and Whannel, 2018: 39).

McGuigan suggests in *Cultural Populism* that it is only in the 1970s that Hall 'registers the impact of the feminisms' (McGuigan, 1992: 31), but that is to overlook the fact that in *The Popular Arts* there is a serious engagement with forms of women's popular culture. One chapter is concerned with a range of forms of romance fiction, 'Falling in Love', while 'Fantasy and Romance' deals with romantic comedy in cinema. As Richard Dyer (2018) (another graduate of the Centre) notes, for two New Left men of their generation and writing in 1964,

... it is remarkable that they wrote about such fiction at all, and seriously and in detail, and much of their argument concerns the implications for women's emancipation. Their discussion was published eleven years after the first translations of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and only a year after Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, with its critique of romance fiction, and it seems to anticipate the debates over pleasure, romance, and pornography that were to be so central to second-wave feminism less than ten years later. (p. xi)

As Dyer (2018) points out in his introduction to the 2018 edition, *The Popular Arts* is 'poised on a cusp between a tradition of cultural critique that preceded it, Arnold and Leavis by way of Hoggart and Williams, and the cultural and film studies that were to come' (p. vii). The women working with Hall at the Birmingham Centre were crucial to that 'cusp'; they drew on a similar tradition, Hoggart, Williams, (and Hall), but brought new forms of interdisciplinarity and theory to that tradition; and they all wrote from a declared feminist position.

Angela McRobbie's (1991) work on the teenage magazine *Jackie* acknowledges the 'immensely influential *Uses of Literacy*' (p. xiv) but also makes use of the semiology of Roland Barthes and of Althusser's theory of ideology. Originally presented as an occasional paper at the Centre, '*Jackie*: an Ideology of Adolescent Femininity' was written as a response to the current work on subcultures, particularly that of Paul Willis,⁶ because, as she later argued in the introduction to the published book, 'there was no equivalent work at that time which looked at young women or which highlighted gender' (McRobbie, 1991: p. x). Like Willis, McRobbie (1991) employed a version of ethnography, which she later allowed was 'small scale and perhaps clumsily ethnographic' (p. x).

Rosalind Coward's (1984) *Female Desire* also made use of semiology, taking both its structure and its theoretical frame from Roland Barthes' 1957 *Mythologies*, while adding psycho-analysis to the toolkit of methodologies for reading popular fictions. Coward owns her complicity and pleasure in the texts that she analyses; 'The True Story of How I became My Own Woman' addresses the pleasures of reading the 'woman centred novel' (Coward, 1984: 177). Identifying a crossover between fiction from feminist publishing houses such as The Women's Press and Virago and contemporary commercially published novels centred on women's experience, Coward (1984) makes a distinction

between those writers who disrupt conventions of gender and sexuality, citing as examples Doris Lessing, Fay Weldon and Angela Carter, and those who produce ‘a type of narrative which corresponds to existing (and therefore problematic) ways of defining women through their sexual personhood’ (p. 186). This is not unlike the judgements of the Leavises, Hoggart, Hall and Whannel, that some forms of the novel are better, both morally and aesthetically, than others. There is little in *Female Desire* on the context of publishing, and no ethnographic research (other than ‘fieldwork . . . on myself and friends and family’ (Coward, 1984: 15)), but in its use of semiology and its invocation of literary history, it does pay careful attention to the texts. The bibliography cites the work emerging from feminists at the Centre with reference to Angela McRobbie, Charlotte Brunsdon and Janice Winship and offers a snapshot of the theory then being read by feminists at the Centre in the 1970s and 1980s – Foucault and Lacan figure large.

Janice Winship’s work on women’s magazines was also undertaken at the Centre and takes up Hoggart’s remarks on ‘Peg’s Paper’ to look at the contemporary publishing landscape. *Inside Women’s Magazines*, written in 1987, expresses the same sense of marginalisation that McRobbie and Brunsdon later articulated; as a feminist studying a despised feminine form of culture, Winship (1987), like Coward, acknowledges the contradictions in her own pleasure in popular forms:

I felt that to dismiss women’s magazines was also to dismiss the lives of millions of women who read and enjoyed them each week. I still enjoyed them, found them useful and escaped with them. And I knew I couldn’t be the only feminist who was a ‘closet’ reader.

That didn’t mean I wasn’t critical of them. I was (and am) but it was just that double edge – my simultaneous attraction and rejection – which seemed to me to be a real nub of feminist concern. (p. xiii)

Winship’s study begins, in line with the feminist tenet ‘The Personal is Political’, with her own history of reading women’s magazines. Like Coward (whom she cites, along with Barthes’ *Mythologies*), she employs semiological analysis in her case studies of individual magazines, and works with an Althusserian theory of ideology to develop an analysis of constructions of women’s subjectivities. She provides a cultural history of the British woman’s magazine and situates her case studies in the context of the contemporary publishing industry, taking on not only the (then) commercially successful titles *Woman’s Weekly*, *Woman* and *Cosmopolitan* but also the contemporary landscape of avowedly feminist titles, *Spare Rib*, *Women’s Review* and *Everywoman*.

Concurrent with the work of the Birmingham Centre women were a number of feminists working in organisations aligned with the Centre. History Workshop, largely organised by the historian Raphael Samuel (Stuart Hall’s contemporary at Oxford), operated with a range of research groups – among them a satellite group working on Popular Fiction. Out of that group came a 1984 conference at Ruskin College, Oxford, which resulted in the publication of a collection of essays, *The Progress of Romance*, edited by Jean Radford and published in the History Workshop series in 1986; many of the contributors would go on to write significant texts in the field.⁷ The collection set out ‘to present some of the new thinking on popular writing to a wider audience’ (Radford,

1986: 2) and came from a firmly historical perspective. In her introduction, Radford (1986) evokes Richard Hoggart and Queenie Leavis as precedents in the study of popular fiction but warns that ‘What both of these earlier critiques of popular culture have in common is that both employ a static and idealised concept of Literature as a source of supra-historical *value*’ (p. 6).

In the American context, Janice Radway’s influential, if controversial,⁸ study of a group of romance fiction readers in *Reading the Romance* was first published in 1984. Writing a new introduction in 1987, she begins with an acknowledgement of the influence of the work done at the Centre for Contemporary Culture:

Reading the Romance does take up specific questions that have preoccupied British feminists and cultural studies scholars for some time. Thus I would like to highlight those questions, consider how and why they were posed as they were in *Reading the Romance*, and explore their similarity to and differences from the questions posed by British scholars working on subcultures and the culture of women and girls . . . the political implications . . . have been articulated more clearly for me by my continuing engagement with the work of British feminists and cultural studies scholars. (Radway, 1987: 2)

Radway acknowledges that while, like the work of British feminists, her study addresses questions of gender and readership, questions of ideology were not then, in America in 1984, on the agenda; it was the work of McRobbie, Brunson, David Morley, Dorothy Hobson and Stuart Hall at the Birmingham Centre that brought her to an understanding of the need to go beyond empirical research and to acknowledge the contradictions in both her subjects’ reading experience and in her own interpretations of that experience. Radway’s ethnography was rather less ‘small scale’ than McRobbie’s; she writes from the context of an American Studies department which was then employing anthropology, rather than sociology, as a method for the analysis of American popular culture. Her study is focussed on 32 women readers (still a relatively small group) in the fictionalised ‘Smithton’; while Radway is sensitive to the potential for patronising her subjects, she takes refuge in her status as an academic to distance herself from the pleasures of the texts her group enjoy. There is a disturbing edge to the study in which the readers become a group to be analysed, their ‘chronic reading’ (Radway, 1987: 60) a problem to be understood by the feminist scholar. Nonetheless, she ends her 1987 introduction with a rallying cry to pay attention to ‘our culture’s “pink ghetto”’ (Radway, 1987: 18), and calls for a serious engagement with marginalised and despised forms of feminine culture.

Also in America, Tania Modleski’s (1982) *Loving with a Vengeance* identifies in contemporary cultural analysis ‘the persistent scorn for all things feminine’ (p. 13) and goes on to make use of Barthes and Althusser, and of Freud, Lacan and Foucault, as did many of the feminists then working at the Birmingham Centre, although she does not cite any of the contemporary feminist work in Britain. She does, however, reference *The Popular Arts* and Richard Dyer’s work on film genre; *Loving with a Vengeance* covers both romance fiction and soap opera. Modleski (1982) positions her work as a feminist challenge to both the ‘high art’ critic (citing Q.D. Leavis) and the mechanistic analysis of some Marxist critics (the Frankfurt School), and opens with the rallying cry: ‘It is time to begin a feminist reading of women’s reading . . .’. (p. 34).

Modleski and Radway are two of the three feminists McGuigan cites in his footnote.⁹ In acknowledging the contribution of feminist scholarship on romance to the field of cultural studies, McGuigan (1992) goes on to argue that 'No longer is it thought illegitimate to study . . . Hollywood films or romance fiction' (p. 3), but McRobbie's memory of the 1970s, that 'the kind of academic work we were engaged in was bound to appear illegitimate' has not gone away; there is now a newly politicised attack on the kind of work that cultural studies does. The term 'Cultural Marxism' currently refers not to Antonio Gramsci or to the Frankfurt School, but to a right-wing conspiracy theory of left-wing infiltration. The overhaul of the British school curriculum, and particularly the literature syllabus, in favour of 'traditional' topics and subjects¹⁰ is another instance of an assault on the interdisciplinarity and methodologies of cultural studies.

There are powerful forces still in literary studies who would prefer that Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis should remain as the cultural arbiters of what qualifies as 'Literature'. As Modleski (1982) notes, in terms which remain the case three decades later, 'Periodically, a champion of high culture will deplore at great length the decline of taste and sensibility on the part of the reading and viewing public' (p. 110). Among those champions was the American literary critic Harold Bloom. Two years after the publication of *Cultural Populism*, in 1994, Bloom went further than either F.R. or Q.D. Leavis in his diatribe of absolute certainty against cultural populism with the publication of *The Western Canon*. For him, the 'Western Canon' is defined by 'those authors who are authoritative in our culture' (Bloom, 1994: 1). Bloom is a hard line version of Matthew Arnold and represents a late 20th-century reinscription of what McGuigan (1992) terms 'English literary criticism's petit bourgeois "discrimination" strategy'. (p. 46)

Bloom's canon is highly gendered; only four women writers (Jane Austen, George Eliot, Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf) make it into the definitive 26 of Bloom's 'Western Canon', and of those, it is only the American Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf who merit their own chapters. Bloom has no time for the 'popular' and his language evokes the bellicosity of Q.D. Leavis. He decries 'current squalors' (Bloom, 1994: 1) and denounces 'the academic-journalistic network I have dubbed the School of Resentment who wish to overthrow the Canon in order to advance their supposed (and non-existent) programs for social change . . .' (Bloom, 1994: 4). The 'patronisingly hierarchical conception of culture descended from the apex of individual cultivation' that McGuigan ascribes to T.S. Eliot (p. 21) is alive and well in Harold Bloom and continues in many academic literature departments across the world. For every attempt to 'decolonialize' or to recalibrate the gender balance of the curriculum, there are those who, continuing to brandish Harold Bloom, are more concerned with the 'survival possibilities' of the Western Canon (Bloom, 1994: 4). Bloom's (1994) 'School of Resentment' includes 'Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, Semioticians' (p. 527), all terms which the feminists at Birmingham Centre embraced as methodologies central to their work.

It is not only male Professors of a certain age who deride the 'squalor' (in Harold Bloom's term) of popular genres. Fay Weldon (1984), a writer who is herself well versed in popular forms,¹¹ warned her fictional niece Alice to beware of 'Romance Alley', 'the hyped twin houses of *Scruples* and *Lace*' (Weldon was writing in 1984), warning that

blockbuster novels are ‘calculated to divert and impress and often do – but do not take them seriously, Alice, and know them for what they are’ (p. 17)

It is possible both to know these texts for ‘what they are’ and to take them seriously. The popular novel is not a barometer of social history, and it is never a simple reflection of its times, but what it can do is to chart the limits and shifts in social discourse, and so offer insights into what can and cannot be spoken and publicly acknowledged in any given period. John Sutherland (1981) has argued that what is significant about best-selling novels is ‘what they tell us about the book trade, the market place, the reading public and society generally at the time they have done well’ (p. 5).

The popular novel is not a fixed category, and there is fluidity among readers, authors and publishers as to what texts can be classified as ‘high-brow’, ‘middle-brow’ and ‘low-brow’ (in Q.D. Leavis’ terminology). As Jean Radford (1986) points out, ‘the Literature/popular opposition distorts the way in which writing is historicised’ (p. 7); that is, the question of ‘literary value’ evades and displaces the historical context of any given text or genre. The sub-genres of the domestic romance are defined by their historical context, and often themselves contribute towards a definition of a decade, as in the sex and shopping novels which embodied the consumerism of the 1980s, Bridget Jones who personified the anxious young professional woman of the 1990s or the derogatorily titled ‘chick-lit’ and ‘yummy mummy’ novels of the new millennium which addressed contemporary women’s life choices (see Philips, 2014). When a number of writers who achieve popular status and a wide readership are preoccupied with a shared narrative, then this is a signal that something important is being addressed. As Jerry Palmer argued of the thriller genre in 1978,

... literature is part of society both in its process of production and of consumption, the common denominators that tie a text into each other form part of the stock of commonplaces of that society, the more popular the group of texts, the more this is true. (pp. 3–4)

The sub-genres of popular fictions written and read by women indicate a great deal about contemporary discourses surrounding gender, and those discourses shift historically. Their narratives tend to cluster around the dominant discourses of femininity in any given period, either to challenge or embrace that hegemony. And they can often challenge received wisdoms; to read across the output of Mills and Boon from 1945 to 1960 is to be confronted with narratives in which their heroines were by no means content to return to the domestic sphere, and indicate that women’s aspirations in the post-war period prioritised meaningful employment over true romance (see Philips and Haywood, 1998).

Women writers writing in the same period across the hierarchy of ‘literary taste’ can often be seen to concern themselves with very similar issues, and can come to very similar conclusions; in the 1950s, both Iris Murdoch and Barbara Cartland were concerned with the impact of the war on contemporary masculinity. In the 1970s, Alice Walker in *Meridian* and Andrea Newman in *Bouquet of Barbed Wire* addressed the impact of university on young women. Although popular fiction may not be taken seriously by critics, these novels can express commonly experienced doubts and anxieties that cannot be admitted in any other context.

These texts offer an articulation of anxieties about what it means to be a woman, the desires and contradictions of the feminine, that are inadmissible elsewhere; they can, as Sally Munt (1994) puts it, express ‘historically specific and identifiable social fears and desires’ (p. 201). The novel can confront these tensions in a way that cannot be found in other forms of popular culture, even those with a predominantly female readership or audience. Women’s magazines present lifestyle aspirations, while soap operas are concerned with stories of communities rather than those of individual women. The novel is a fictional form that unapologetically presents an entirely subjective point of view. The narrative voice in these novels is, almost without exception, intensely personal. The narrator, whether first or third person, frequently assumes a tone of intimacy with the reader, often addressing the reader directly; a strategy that is employed by women writers as far apart stylistically as Monica Dickens, Alice Walker, Fay Weldon and Helen Fielding.

To trace the tropes and contradictions in popular fictions, to identify a discourse across a genre (or even to identify a genre) is not necessarily to celebrate these texts as aesthetically important but rather a strategy – to identify what their shared preoccupations are. These are popular fictions, and they do tend to offer neat ideological resolutions, but what should not be underestimated is that they represent a space in which anxieties and unease can be articulated. Those resolutions are not inevitably ideologically comfortable; a current publishing genre for women readers is dubbed by *The Bookseller* ‘domestic noir’. Following the successes of *Gone Girl* (2012) and *Girl on the Train*¹² (2014), publishers packaged their books with dark photographic covers and bold sans serif lettering, in a clear indication that this is now an established publishing genre.

Jacqueline Rose (2015), in a damning review of *Girl on the Train* and *Gone Girl* in the *London Review of Books*, wondered how it could be that ‘such hatred of women would be so popular’ (p. 25), and deplored a form of fiction in which women are victimised and abused. While Rose is right to argue that these women characters are victims, it is important to question why these narratives should be so popular among women readers, and to acknowledge that their female characters are by no means passive victims. These heroines discover not only that there is a fine line between a passionate masculine lover and a violent abuser, but also that they themselves have a measure of murderous vengeance; they are full of vengeful rage and exert their powers to bring abusive men to some form of justice. These novels can be read as an expression of profound mistrust in contemporary forms of masculinity. What they all share is an account of a damaged woman, the plight of a woman who is not believed, who exacts some form of revenge on an abusive male partner; many were written before the ‘MeToo’ movement and before ‘coercive control’ became a recognised legal term. This is a genre that suggests that something is indeed rotten in contemporary gender roles and that many contemporary women writers have deep and violent concerns about the current state of relationships between men and women.

The discourses surrounding women’s anxiety and the conflicting demands of contemporary femininity are not restricted to Western genre fiction. India has a thriving publishing industry which produces its own versions of fictions concerned with young professional women. Like their Western counterparts, these are narratives which are deeply ambivalent about contemporary shifts in the economy and culture and renegotiate those discourses in an Indian context. There is a whole genre concerning young women

negotiating the complexities of a newly economically liberal India, which replicate to a marked extent the anxieties of the Western ‘chick-lit novel’. The confessional and intimate voice of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is there too in the often first person narratives of the Indian versions of the single woman novel, a sharing of the conflicts between family and tradition and the possibilities now available to young Indian women (see Dawson Varughese, 2013, and Philips, 2015).

Many of those texts are not published in Britain, although they are largely written in English. These are novels for which the question of aesthetic value is not appropriate, they are written in a second language (or, it could be a third or fourth), to reach the widest readership among the great range of Indian dialects and languages, and they can often be awkwardly expressed. They are nonetheless very widely read¹³ and they offer their readership a set of aspirational narratives that frame the contemporary experience of ‘Young India’, to borrow a term from Chetan Bhagat, India’s most popular novelist by a long way, but one who is largely absent from Western discussions of Indian fiction.

While ‘literary’ novelists writing about India, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh among others, have offered a challenge to the neoliberal economics and values of Western capitalism, this is not the case for many popular novelists currently writing in India. Bhagat is hardly acknowledged in post-colonial literary studies, but he is nonetheless India’s best-selling writer, whose novels and essays celebrate a new India of cut-throat competition and self-promotion. To date, Bhagat’s novels have sold over seven million copies; in 2008, the *New York Times* cited Bhagat as ‘the biggest selling English language novelist in India’s history’. In a 2012 collection of essays, *What Young India Wants*, Bhagat (2012) exhorts his readership to monetary ambition: ‘We need to get rich, and fast . . .’ (p. 129). For Bhagat, ‘Young India’ should be asserting itself as aspirational and entrepreneurial, he urges the generation who grew up in the wake of India’s second-generation economic reforms to embrace globalisation and the American way of getting rich.

A post-colonial understanding that is framed only by those literary novels that make their way to a Western readership can only ever provide a partial understanding. It is important to recognise that the way in which the ‘New India’ is experienced by millions of readers is rather different from the India of the literary novel; it is difficult to make claims for Indian fiction without at least some knowledge of other, widely read, voices.

This is a political moment when populism is on the rise internationally; at a moment of hegemonic crisis, populism offers apparently simple answers that seem reassuring at a time of anxiety in the face of globalisation and the widening gulf in national and global inequalities. It is politically important to understand what those reassuring narratives are, and why they might be attractive.

A serious academic engagement with romance fiction emerged out of a feminist concern for, in Brunson’s words, ‘that which has been forbidden, disavowed, or abandoned’. To pay close attention to popular forms is not necessarily to celebrate them or, as McGuigan (1992) suggests, witheringly, to ‘affect a disingenuous solidarity with ordinary people and their preferences’ (p. 77). While, as Weldon advocated, ‘knowing popular fictions for what they are’ is a necessary strategy, it is nonetheless important to ignore her advice and to take them seriously. Popular fictions may indeed offer neat ideological resolutions to structural inequalities, but nevertheless these narratives do engage with

real contradictions in women's lives, as critics of popular culture from Hoggart onwards have long recognised.

The earliest attention to popular fictions came out of a very literary concern to establish a distinction between 'literary' and 'popular texts' and to subject popular novels to close reading (to their detriment). That respect for the text remained and carried through into the feminist work that emerged out of the Centre for Cultural Studies, aligned with the tools of semiological analysis. Janice Winship (1987) acknowledges how much her work owed to Stuart Hall and to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and is also insistent that her theoretical perspective was framed, as it was for other women at the Centre, by her involvement with the women's movement:

I'd like to acknowledge . . . my intellectual debt to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University and to the teaching and inspiration of Stuart Hall . . . It was there what I learnt what Marxism meant . . . and how to think about popular cultural forms like women's magazines . . . this book is a product of and, I hope, a contribution to that cultural studies perspective – transformed, of course, by feminism! (p. xiv)

At a time when gender was not a central issue for either literary or cultural studies, generic fictions written by and for women provided a site for research that was undeniably about female experience and the analysis of those texts offered a strategy for asserting a feminist focus. As Angela McRobbie argued in 1991 (in an updated version of her original work on *Jackie*), a feminist analysis of popular women's fictions could be extended into other forms and media:

Both women's magazines and romantic fiction have been the subject of sustained critical attention. They have been recognised as key cultural forms reflective of distinctively feminine pleasures. Romance exists, of course, well beyond the pages of the magazines. It carries readers, viewers and audiences through a multiplicity of other forms. These include romantic novels, romantic films, and romantic records. Romance has also been credited with supplying the framework for female fantasy. Studying popular romances has been seen . . . as offering a possible point of entry for understanding important aspects of the feminine psyche. (p. 134)

The repeated references to *The Uses of Literacy* and to *Fiction and the Reading Public* in the early feminist work on popular fiction is an indication of how few precedents there were for this 'sustained critical attention' and how little interest there then was in forms of women's popular culture.

In 1982, the Communist journal *Red Letters* published a special issue on popular culture, an indication of the extent to which the field had developed, in which the editorial explicitly rejects the Leavisite and Frankfurt School positions and repudiates cultural populism:

In recent years, popular culture has been a fashionable field of enquiry. Academic trendies, popkult groupies and ponderous theorizers have all traded in the popular culture bazaar. But as socialists involved in cultural politics – who want to use analysis as a tool for change – we must go beyond grudging recognition (or uncritical celebration) of popular culture, and beyond mechanical examination of the institutions that purvey it. We must also consider concretely

what gives it its popularity, the needs it addresses, the fantasies and desires it organizes. (*Red Letters*, 1982, editorial, p. 1)

It is not clear whether the Birmingham feminists are included among those ‘Academic trendies . . . and ponderous theorists’, but they were asking precisely the same questions and, as feminists, they were concerned to engage with their own contradictions in the pleasures of the text.

To trace the trajectory of feminist interventions in the field of cultural studies is to recognise how integral gender relations have always been to the discipline, marginalised maybe, but always there. To read *Cultural Populism* from the perspective of more than 25 years since its first publication is to recognise that, despite the sophistication of McGuigan’s account of the development of cultural studies, there is a reluctance to fully engage with the challenges that gender, sexuality and diversity presented to an earlier class-based analysis of popular culture. There is a lurking mistrust of identity politics throughout McGuigan’s (1992) text, a reluctance to relinquish a hierarchy of cultural values, and a weariness with a feminist insistence on ‘representational politics’ (p. 31).

Feminist writers inside and outside the Centre for Cultural Studies were drawn to denigrated forms of popular culture, precisely because these are sites which focus on the domestic and on women’s experience. They recognised that there is a hierarchy of cultural forms, and that that hierarchy is distinctly gendered, and they raised the question of whether it is because these are modes that are largely consumed by women audiences that they are so despised.

Contemporary popular fictions, whether written or televised, offer narratives that are by default about gender relations, the experience of women and, in the 21st century, the impact of a neoliberal economy on family and working lives. These texts articulate significant discourses, they make widespread anxieties and aspirations visible, and cultural critics should pay close attention to what they have to tell us. Richard Dyer argued in 1992, ‘. . . we might be well advised to listen, really listen, to the discourse of entertainment itself’ (p. 7). That discourse is not limited to representations of class, but also speaks to gender and race.

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Notes

1. ‘Feminism’ is cited in the index with the entry ‘Feminism in general’, an indication of a lack of specific engagement with feminist ideas.
2. The Centre for Cultural Studies was located on the top floors of the Muirhead Building on the University of Birmingham campus.
3. Among them is Dorothy Hobson, whom McGuigan singles out for particular opprobrium in *Cultural Populism*.

4. Leavis and Thompson (1962).
5. *Scrutiny* was founded in 1932 by F.R. Leavis with L.C. Knights and published until 1953.
6. Paul Willis published *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* in 1977.
7. Among them, Alison Light published *Forever England: Literature, Femininity and Conservatism between the Wars* (London: Routledge 1991), Helen Taylor *Scarlett's Women: Gone with the Wind and its Female Fans* (London: Virago, 1989), while Michèle Roberts became more widely known as a novelist.
8. Radway was criticised both for the size of her sample group and for her condescending approach to romance readers.
9. The third is Deborah Philips.
10. Michael Gove, then Conservative Minister for Education in the 2010–2015 Coalition government, reorganised the GCSE Literature curriculum to include more British writers and the History syllabus to focus more on British history (www.gov.uk/government/speeches, 7 June 2014).
11. In 1986, Weldon wrote a weekly serial for the magazine *Woman* which was published a year later as a novel under the title *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, although the published novel makes no reference to its origins.
12. The latter title was apparently changed from 'Woman' to 'Girl', to align it with Flynn's best seller.
13. It is impossible to get figures for the readership of these fictions, because, as with Mills and Boon novels, there is a thriving trade in second-hand copies and any sales figures will be an underestimation of the actual number of readers.

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Biographical note

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