

1

Women's Genres and Female Agency

THIS book traces the historical engagement between feminism and soap opera in the 1970s and 1980s, suggesting that this engagement can be read as representative or typical of the Western second-wave feminist engagement with the media and popular culture generally. The category of 'women's genres' has been increasingly used since the mid-1980s to refer to a cross-media, interdisciplinary area of textual production and study. This can be understood to include romance fiction, women's and girls' magazines, television soap opera, film melodrama, and 'weepies'. A radical definition would also include fashion, make-up, knitting, dressmaking, and other aspects of traditional women's and girls' culture and media. 'Women's genres' are the media, skills, and practices of conventional femininities. There was a large increase in academic publishing on these topics in the 1980s and this has become an increasingly popular area for the attention of feminist academics (see, for example, Modleski 1982; Coward 1984; Parker 1984; Radway 1984; Ang 1985; Wilson 1985; Winship 1987; Doane 1987; Mann and Spigel 1988; H. Taylor 1989; Gaines and Herzog 1990; McRobbie 1991; Bobo and Seiter 1991; Basinger 1993; Radner 1995; Sparke 1995). This book suggests that there has been a particularly privileged relationship between this burgeoning scholarship on women's genres in the 1980s and the coming-into-being of a new figure within the academy: the feminist intellectual.

When Annette Kuhn surveyed the literature on 'Women's Genres' in 1984, she was concerned with research on film and television, and particularly with the different conceptualizations of gender and spectatorship therein. Kuhn pointed to the increased feminist interest in 'gynocentric' genres such as film melodrama and soap opera which have mass appeal for female audiences. Within the literature she reviews, recurrent interest is expressed in the representation of and identification with central female protagonists, female desire, narrative modes and rhythms specific to femininity, and the modes of female spectatorship (Kuhn 1984). Although I too want to concentrate on audio-visual women's genres in tracing a certain overdetermination

in the production of soap opera as a privileged object of study for feminist scholars, I want briefly to place the work on film and television women's genres within a broader perspective. This has two parameters: the feminist 'return to the feminine' which begins in the later 1970s, and the search, within much feminist research across disciplines, for instances and evidence of female agency. I would argue that the critical writing on film melodrama and soap opera that Kuhn surveys cannot be understood without reference to a much more general feminist reconsideration of mass cultural forms addressed to female consumers such as women's magazines and romance fiction.¹ This focus on 'mass' forms for female consumers coincides with a more general 'turn to the audience' and validation of the audience for/consumers of commodity culture as active meaning makers rather than passive consumers. If the active meaning maker in the cultural studies of the 1970s was the subcultural youth (Clarke et al. 1975), celebrated for his ability to wrestle creatively with mass media cultures, in the 1980s it was the television viewer, perhaps most iconically as celebrated by John Fiske (1987a), a potential guerrilla of the living room sofa.

**(i) Women's
Genres:
The Feminist
Engagement**

In the potent imagery which has come to symbolize the origins of second-wave feminism, it is the hostile engagement with the images of conventional femininity in the late 1960s and early 1970s which has proved most enduring. The mythical bra-burning, the protests at the Miss America pageant in 1968, the flour bombs at the British staging of the Miss World contest in 1970, the image of the bra-less woman

¹ While I do not intend to deal with film melodrama at any length—Christine Gledhill offers a very authoritative mapping of the field in her 1987 *Home is Where the Heart Is*, while Marcia Landy's collection (1991) reprints nearly every relevant article published in the 1970–90 period—it is important to note that the feminist 'return to the feminine', which directs critical attention to the film melodrama, occurs simultaneously with a new attention to this genre within film studies. This was inaugurated not through feminist concerns, although the representation of the family was an unavoidable topic and Freud not long absent, but through an attention to the work of directors Douglas Sirk and Vincente Minnelli (Willemen 1971; Elsaesser 1972). Film studies, while institutionally marginal, was one of the most overtly politicized and theoretically engaged disciplines in Britain in the 1970s, symbolized through the reach and reputation of the journal *Screen*. And it was in this journal, *Framework*, and the *Brighton Film Review* that the first radical rereadings of film melodrama appeared. The argument, far from initially offering a reevaluation of melodrama in feminist terms, actually valorized directors such as Douglas Sirk for their 'Brechtian' handling of pulp feminine fiction and their transcendence of this generic material (Willemen 1971). Although work by Elsaesser (1972), Nowell-Smith (1977), Pollock (1977), and Mulvey (1977) also posed the issue of the representation of the family, and film form as marked with the contradictions of patriarchal capitalism—all concerns informed by feminism or amenable to feminist transformation—it is important to remember that there was a separately developing interest in melodrama in film studies in the 1970s which plays into, and is reworked by, specifically feminist concerns with genres aimed at women.

with unshaven legs—these events and images have dominated the popular media representations of feminism and the feminist. The feminist is primarily perceived as against the feminine. The story I want to tell is a different one, which does indeed start with this repudiation, but is then mainly occupied with a reinvestigation and re-engagement with the feminine, most commonly sought in ‘women’s genres’. My proposal is that we can use a repudiation–reinvestigation–revaluation schema as one way of characterizing the relationship between second-wave feminism and mass cultural feminine forms. This type of periodization has been used by other feminists offering retrospectives on the development of feminist scholarship in a particular disciplinary area: for example, Catherine Hall in the development of feminist history (Hall 1992), or Ann Rosalind Jones on the development of US feminist literary criticism (1993: 72). This three-part schema covers the period discussed in this essay, although I here concentrate on the latter phases. Periodizations and autobiographical accounts that echo these phases can be discerned in the interviews below. It is another way of thinking the transformation from a movement for women’s liberation to a feminism which has a primary existence within the academy, and, as Jennifer Wicke (1994) has argued, in the celebrity zone, where it has been spoken by women as different as Princess Diana and Oprah Winfrey. It also offers us, at perhaps a more colloquial level, a way of thinking about the way in which women who identify as feminists look and dress and how this has changed since the early 1970s. I should stress that it is offered only as a schema—something to think with—and although I do think there is a traceable historical sequence through these phases, I am not suggesting that the divisions between phases are clear, or that all feminists proceeded in orderly fashion from ‘repudiation’ to ‘revaluation’.

So in this schema the most ‘movement’ moment of second-wave Western feminism in the late 1960s/early 1970s is a moment partly formed in and through a repudiation of conventional and traditional femininities and their appropriate genres. For example, to quote from a founding text for the British Women’s Liberation movement, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*:

If *Sweethearts* and the other publications of the same kind with their hallucinated love imagery are American, it is unfortunately true that they find a wide distribution in England. There are also trash weeklies called *Mirabelle*, *Valentine*, *Romeo* and, biggest of all, *Jackie* selling upwards of a million copies a week to girls between ten and sixteen years of age, which set forth the British ideals of romance. (1971: 172)

The early feminist response to what were called ‘the mass media’ was suspicion and contestation. Against those images and fictions was

posed the demand for ‘real women’. Media such as women’s magazines or teenage girls’ comics were seen as primary sites for the reproduction of patriarchal definitions of femininity. Traditional sites of feminine skill and interest, such as fashion, cooking, and various kinds of home-making were also regarded with great suspicion. As a popular poster from the London *See Red Collective* put it in 1978, ‘Sisters, examine every aspects of our lives’ (see Fig. 1.1). Of course, my summarizing argument makes things sound very clear—this distancing from conventional femininity was contradictory, partial, and painful, as well as vehement and disciplining. It was also a process understood and experienced rather differently for women of different origins who found themselves differently placed in relation to hegemonic femininity. These contradictions are attended to in many of the retrospective accounts of second-wave feminism which are now available, such as Greene and Kahn’s *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism* (1993) and Micheline Wandor’s book of interviews with British feminists, *Once a Feminist* (1990). For example, Janet Rée recalls holding the meetings of an early women’s group at her home:

One woman stormed out because she said I was always trying to make people feel at ease and wished I would stop. I was always smiling at people. It was awful. She said she was fed up with people just sitting around, middle-class women not getting out and actually doing things. I felt she was completely right. I was a hostess—can you imagine, I always made cakes. And tea and coffee. I’ve always loved making a kind of home. All the peripheral things like cooking and sewing, having a nice warm room, all that. It was really important. But I was very mortified and recognised the justness of that description of myself. I might as well have been hosting the Women’s Institute. That was the subtext. (1990: 100)

The complexity of the feelings expressed here, the contradictory identification with different modes of femininity, across time, ‘can you imagine, I always made cakes’, reveals what a complicated process ‘coming to consciousness’ as a feminist was. This anecdote also points to the way in which class, as Catherine Hall has argued, was a significant, if difficult, consideration in British feminism from the early days (C. Hall 1992: 10), and can be contrasted with Valerie Walkerdine’s defence of the significance of glamour and fantasy for working-class girls and women, in the course of which she has recently observed:

The period of feminism which made me most unhappy with myself was the one in which I wore dungarees and no make-up,

at least partly because it replaced the to-be-looked-at-ness with the trappings of working-class masculinity, dungarees, for example! To me the issues have always been far more complicated than the simple abandonment of the trappings of working-class femininity for those of working-class masculinity. (Walkerdine 1997: 168)

As several other accounts, both in Wandor's collection and other histories, suggest, motherhood was a particularly problematic site for the new feminism—but that is another story (C. Hall 1990; Snitow 1992; Kaplan 1992). So what I've called a 'repudiation' of traditionally feminine skills and media—for example, the things that Janet Rée says she 'always loved', or the glamour that Valerie Walkerdine 'always liked . . . very much indeed' (1997: 168)—has, in a quite complicated way, also to be understood, certainly in some cases, as a 'renunciation', a giving up of the morally and politically wrong.

In ways explored in more detail in the analyses of the interviews below, this feminist repudiation of women's genres in the 1970s and 1980s is strongly articulated through (Eurocentric) class-inflected aesthetic hierarchy and the relative legitimacy of different cultural practices.² That is, although the language of repudiation is a discourse of gender, there is a symmetry between feminist and conventional high cultural dismissals of 'mass culture'. This symmetry can perhaps most usefully be understood to indicate the contradictory imbrication of class and gender heritages and expectations. So on the one hand, we have, as already quoted, Janet Rée being criticized, and criticizing herself, for her middle-class niceness, but on the other, it is impossible to ignore the convergence of traditional aesthetic judgement and feminist critique in their assessment of soap opera and romances. In both systems of judgement, soap opera and romance are trash. These mass-produced genres of femininity were perhaps most threatening, in the context of the apparent class mobility of the post-war expansion of the British education system, to young, generally white, educated women who aspired, like their male counterparts, to be citizens. One way we can perhaps understand this vehement feminist repudiation of women's genres, which points to the enormous contradictoriness of political consciousness, is as a refusal to *be*, in Fay Weldon's resonant 1971 phrase, 'Down among the Women'. First-world feminism founds itself partly through repudiating first-world femininity.

2 I am using Bourdieu's notion of 'legitimacy' in cultural taste here. He explores French taste codes in terms of class, and while he does address gender, it is usually in a metaphorical sense (Bourdieu 1984). More difficult to integrate is the complex colonial history of the construction of ethnic specificity and difference in 'European' aesthetics.

So it is with this history, and in this context, that the first cautious investigations of women's genres are made. As Janice Winship put it in the preface to her 1987 book, the culmination of over fifteen years' research on women's magazines:

'Admitting within feminist circles that I was doing research on—of all things—women's magazines used to make me feel just as comfortable as when I hastily muttered an explanation of my 'study' to politely inquiring friends of my parents . . . Whether feminist friends voiced it or not I felt they were thinking that if I really had to do research (intellectual work has always been somewhat ambiguously tolerated in the women's movement) I should do it on something more important politically: 'Surely we all know women's magazines demean women and solely benefit capitalist profits. What more is there to say?' I experienced myself as a misfitting renegade who rarely dared to speak up for magazines, however weakly. (1987: p. xiii)

The conditions of, and reasons for, the re-engagement with feminine genres are complex. They range from the textually and politically investigative—what is being said here about women, and by whom?—to the recruitist—we have to discover/investigate what women like, so we can change these desires—to the defiantly celebratory—well, it may not be feminist, but I still like it. What I would argue is that the most productive position, the one from which the most nuanced and sophisticated analysis proceeds, combines some of these elements, but is articulated through a much greater degree of self-consciousness and a recognition of subjectivities both formed in, and ambivalent towards, conventional femininity.

In the 1980s came the first publication of the research by feminists in a range of disciplines of culturally devalued forms such as romance fiction (McRobbie and McCabe 1981; Modleski 1982; Radford 1986; Radway 1984; H. Taylor 1989), melodrama (Cook 1983; Gledhill 1987; Harper 1983; Kaplan 1983*b*; Mulvey 1986), girls' comics and school stories (Frith 1989; McRobbie 1991), women's magazines (Winship 1987; Hermes 1993), and fashion (Wilson 1985; Evans and Thornton 1989; Gaines and Herzog 1990). Thus the feminist research into soap opera is part of a much more general re-engagement with the mass cultural forms and fictions of femininity undertaken by feminists, usually, but not always, in the academy.

This move was generally motivated by what Ien Ang has called 'feminist desire' (Ang 1988). Ang used this formulation in a review of Janice Radway's pioneering book *Reading the Romance* where she was criticizing what she characterized as the pedagogic motivation of Radway's research: 'its aim is directed at raising the consciousness of

romance reading women' (Ang 1988: 184). So for Ang, in this context, 'feminist desire' is what Angela McRobbie designated 'recruitist' in an early sensitive essay about the relationship between feminist researchers and the women or girls 'on' whom they might be working (McRobbie 1982*b*: 52). Although this kind of recruitist feminist desire is clearly present to some extent in very many feminist critics working on these genres, I think we can, at this point, usefully extend the notion of 'feminist desire' to include a less activist and more self-reflexive moment, which is constituted through the desire to understand femininity. A feminist desire to understand the complexities, desires, and contradictions of femininity which is conceptualized variously and plurally as a position, an identity, and a psychic formation (Brownmiller 1984; Coward 1984; Rose 1983). Traditional first-world femininity is made strange by feminism—it is denaturalized, and therefore the multiplicity of textual sites on which it is elaborated become areas for possible investigation.

Different writers stress different aspects of this feminist investigation of femininity, using different theoretical approaches to different ends. A most significant division is that formed in attitudes towards psychoanalysis, and it is an embrace of psychoanalytic theory which distinguishes the work, for example, of Jacqueline Rose (1986), Elizabeth Cowie (1984), and Laura Mulvey (1989) in the approach to femininity, and which has underpinned one of the key divisions in feminist scholarship. This is commonly represented as a division of feminist work into an 'empirical' or pragmatic US tradition and a theoretical (psychoanalytic) French school (Moi 1985 offers an early version of this history). The interviewees discuss their own negotiations of this historical division in Part III. For our purposes here, as significant—indeed symptomatic—is the extent to which the writer sees herself as included within the category 'feminine' to be investigated, for this often indicates the extent to which conscious identity is understood as amenable to rational improvement.

Rosalind Coward, for example, in the preface of her 1984 book *Female Desire*, a best-selling text of 're-engagement', says:

In *Female Desire* I'm not approaching 'feminine' pleasures as an outsider; nor as a stranger to guilt. The pleasures I describe are often my pleasures. Food, cooking, clothes, novels, soap operas, houses, nature programmes—these are all my enjoyments. I don't approach these things as a distant critic but as someone examining myself, examining my own life under a microscope. But nor will I treat these pleasures as sacrosanct. Good girls enjoy what they're given but what they're given may not always be good for them. (1984: 14)

Although there is a clear tension here between the agenda set up in the last sentence, when criteria for the distinction between different pleasures are implied, and the earlier identity claimed with other enjoyers of 'feminine' pleasures, Coward is at pains to stress how much she has invested in this project. Cora Kaplan too, writing about 'Fiction, Fantasy and Femininity', is careful to introduce her essay with a discussion not only of her passionate involvement in reading books like *Gone with the Wind* and *The Thornbirds*, but also of her commitment to the self-presentational modes of femininity:

Both my parents found my slavish addiction to fifties femininity, its fashions that harnessed thrust and spiked us and its macho-femme versions of sexual difference, regressive and worrying. For me however, my political and sexual desires, utopian and transgressive, were bound together, which made my passionate response to *Gone with the Wind* even more contradictory . . .

It was over twenty-five years before a novel triggered the uncontrolled level of fantasy response that I had experienced with *Gone with the Wind* and, not surprisingly, I encountered it first as a television serial. Colleen McCullough's *The Thorn Birds* seduced me away from a more respectable piece of viewing—*The Raj Quartet*—and so profoundly affected was I by the first episode I saw (not the first in the series) that I rushed out to buy the paperback. (1986: 118–20)

Inscribed within Kaplan's account is a profound sense of contradiction. She both distances herself from her parents' view of her 'slavish addiction to fifties femininity' and, through this phrase and the vocabulary of torture used subsequently ('harnessed', 'thrust', 'spiked'), endorses and enhances their judgement. She presents 1950s femininity as perverse—but does this through her presentation of her own involvement in it, not through disavowal. Similarly, when she describes the impact of *The Thornbirds*, she very precisely includes a sense of aesthetic hierarchy ('more respectable'), but once more describes a passionate attachment.

These examples reveal a different kind of feminist engagement with texts of femininity. It is not just a recruitist project—an investigation of the pleasures of others. There is a self—a feminist self—to be investigated too.

(ii) Female Agency and the Female Viewer

The second important general motivation for the re-engagement with feminine genres is the search for feminine agency. This has equivalencies with feminist interventions in other disciplines, but is

complicated by the particularly strong contrast between the (actual) gender of the makers of most film and television and the (image of) the gendered spectator or consumer of these media. Most other feminist explorations of women as agents have sought to establish the contribution of women as makers, rather than consumers, of culture. Thus for example, in relation to art history, one of the earliest feminist books was entitled *Old Mistresses* (Parker and Pollock 1981). In literary studies, Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), using an image from *Jane Eyre*, poses a structural metaphor for the position of women writers in relation to the institution literature. Elaine Showalter, with *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), insists on the existence of women writers. Early feminist history was similarly dominated by the desire to reveal the presence of women, as titles like Sheila Rowbotham's *Hidden from History* (1973b) indicate. In all of these areas a key object of the feminist endeavour was the discovery and location of women as agents—agents who made history, wrote books, and painted pictures.

This search for female agency in relation to television has focused on three main areas: women as producers, women as image, and women as audience, and my argument will be that it is in consideration of women as audience and image that the research on soap opera has been most significant. Although there have been women film directors, and significant early feminist work was addressed to the rediscovery of figures such as Dorothy Arzner, Germaine Dulac, and Ida Lupino, these women have been much less visible than women stars and fans (Cook and Johnston 1975; Flitterman Lewis 1990; Kuhn 1995b). Similarly, key females in the production of television serial drama, such as Irna Phillips and Hazel Adair, fade in contrast to the overwhelming femininity of the image of the housewife viewer (Seiter 1989). It is not that there aren't the possibilities for the patient historical investigation of women's roles in the production of film and television—as we see, for example, in the work of Lauren Rabinovitz (1991) and Sue Harper (1983)—but, as with the reading of novels and popular fiction, and against, for example, the viewing of oil painting, spectatorship in these genres is overwhelmingly feminized, both connotationally and empirically. Although feminism may have directed attention to these genres, it was not feminism that gendered 'weepies', soaps, and women's magazines. What were women doing in this consuming of fiction, following of recipes, watching of soap opera?

In consideration of women as producers there have been two types of investigation: first what we might call the 'hidden from history' approach, when the careers and contributions of key female pioneers, such as Dorothy Arzner or Irna Phillips are documented; secondly, and this was particularly a feature of the 1970s, the exploration and recording of patterns of female employment in the film and televi-

sion industries. Research in this area, particularly the early collation of documentation about the employment of women in the media industries, has usually been developed outside the academy and has often been funded by interested parties such as trade unions.³ Liesbet van Zoonen (1994) in her survey of feminist media studies, has concentrated particularly on research into women as producers, addressing the complex issue of whether any research in this area establishes convincingly that producer gender in fact makes a difference. For our purposes what is most significant is that, perhaps because of the extreme gender stratification visible in television internationally, this has proved a much less fertile ground for feminist research. The very structure of the field has concentrated emphasis on women as viewers, rather than programme makers.

The study of women as image has employed a range of methodologies, from content analysis to textual and narrative analysis, and ranges across 1970s agitprop polemic, to large-scale quantitative surveys funded by advertisers and broadcasters, to cultural or media studies analyses of femininity on screen. What is significant is the importance of soap opera, both actually and connotationally, to the analysis of the images of women and television. One reason for this is given in Gaye Tuchman's much-quoted 1978 formulation of 'the symbolic annihilation of women', which provided a vivid hypothesis about the absence of women on television, as well as specifying their generic presence: 'with the exception of soap opera, where men make up a "mere majority" of the fictional population, television has shown, and continues to show, two men for every woman' (p. 10). Gaye Tuchman's discussion of soap opera in this article, stands, along with Mildred Downing's 1974 piece on 'The Heroine of the Daytime Serial', as an early US attempt to think of women on television soap opera in the context of second-wave feminism. There have since been a series of studies within, particularly, US mass communications which have focused on soap opera and have included an investigation of the type of roles available for women, and the type of women likely to fill them (see, for example, Cantor and Pingree 1983).

Within the expansive field of quantitative content analysis, we find that soap opera is a favoured research site. There has been substantial—and continuing—interest in mapping the contours of life on television through the content analysis of soap opera, while there is rather less attention to other genres (Frentz 1992). Within cultural and media studies—as with quantitative content analysis—soap

³ Thus e.g. Margaret Gallagher has produced a number of reports since her 1981 UNESCO survey *Unequal Opportunities* (e.g. Gallagher 1984) while the ACTT was also active in collecting statistics about the employment of women within the film industry (ACTT 1975). In the USA, the US Commission on Civil Rights produced an influential report in the 1970s, *Window-Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*.

opera was mainly attractive to feminists as an object of analysis because it was perceived to be both for and about women. But within the cultural studies context, there has been a tendency towards rather broader cultural analysis. Here, there is a recurring concern with the meaning and status of soap opera as mass feminine culture. Soap opera is a significant instance of the historical connotative femininity of mass culture pointed out by scholars such as Patrice Petro (1986) and Andreas Huyssen (1986), and particularly of the privileged place of television within this historical aesthetic gendering. Soap opera, within this connotational set, metonymically signifies the worst of television, and thus the genre is interesting to some scholars for what it means as much as what it is. It was to this gendering of aesthetic judgement that feminist critics were partly addressing themselves, as we see in this comment from 1981 by Terry Lovell writing about *Coronation Street*:

Yet within this almost universal denigration, soap opera does provide the pleasures of validation, and of self-assertion, which must surely go some way to accounting for its lasting popularity with women (1981: 51; my emphasis)

Ien Ang, writing about a quite different programme, *Dallas*, a little later, offers precisely this recognition of a pleasure that is off the critical map in the wording of her original advertisement to attract viewer/respondents: 'I like watching the TV serial *Dallas* but I often get odd reactions to it' (1985: 10). Much later, when these ideas about the place of soap opera within class, gender, and aesthetic hierarchies have become an accepted element of approaches to the programmes—rather than just governing these approaches unconsciously—we find this structure of feeling incorporated into an article title by Pertti Alasuutari, 'I'm Ashamed to Admit It But I Have Watched *Dallas*: The Moral Hierarchy of Television Programmes' (1992). It is also historically significant that 1978 saw the launch and subsequent international success of *Dallas*. So the interest in television programmes directed at women/housewives displayed by feminist critics coincides with popular serial melodrama as a worldwide phenomenon. Feminist work on soap opera develops alongside studies of the international reception of *Dallas* (Katz and Liebes 1985), as well as the reconsideration of film melodrama already alluded to.

(iii) Women as Audience

Early feminist research on soap opera was often conducted in the context of enquiry into 'the housewife's day'. It was the housewife and her housework which was the starting point, rather than any organization of the television text. Carol Lopate (1976) discusses US day-

time game shows and soaps in a more general discussion of the rhythms and preoccupations of daytime television, itself motivated by the issue of what was available for the housewife, while Dorothy Hobson's work on *Crossroads* (1982) emerged from earlier research on the daily culture of young working-class women at home (Hobson 1978a). Concerns with domestic time, rhythm, and the engaged role of the viewer recur in the work of Modleski (1979), Seiter (1981b), and Mattelart (1982). This initial focus, on ways and rhythms of viewing, rather than detailed textual analysis, could be seen to characterize feminist approaches to television domestic serial drama. So although there is detailed work on *Coronation Street*, *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *General Hospital*, and *Brookside*, the overarching concerns do seem to have been more with the involvement and pleasures of female viewers in the patterns of domestic viewing (Dyer et al. 1981; Swanson 1981; Feuer 1992; Geraghty 1992). That is, unlike the exquisitely detailed film analyses that we find in the work of feminist critics like Elizabeth Cowie (1984) or Mary Ann Doane (1987), the emphasis in television research has been on 'the real world of women watching'—or indeed, not watching, to incorporate a common research finding.

Early discussion of women television viewers was thus not genre-specific. Subsequent ethnographic work has tended either to be so, or, as with the work of Gray (1992a), Morley and Silverstone (1991), and Moores (1993), to locate television viewing within the whole complex of media usages within the household. Genre-specific work is almost always, internationally, research on soap opera, in its many national guises, and is a particularly attractive genre of choice for ethnographic researchers for a range of reasons. For feminists, as we have seen, the connotational gendering of the genre is significant, and offers a sufficient rationale. However, it is also the case that many of the features of the genre can be seen as epitomizing much of what is specific to television: seriality, intimacy, domesticity, repetition, and the mundane. So soap opera, and the study of soap opera, can function as a *mise en abyme* for television watching generally. There are also pragmatic reasons. The longevity of series like *Dallas*, *Coronation Street*, or *Neighbours* and the way in which, as texts, they exceed any specific viewing occasion, make them ideal focuses for research projects which necessarily take place in time. Although the researcher may not be watching the same episode with each subject, they can be confident that they are in some ways watching the same show. Similarly, because of the way in which soaps partly have their existence in day-to-day conversations away from the television set, talking about soap can seem to be a much more natural, unstaged

research situation than setting up special viewings of a particular programme or play.⁴

As is clear, the feminist interest in television programmes was from the beginning usually formulated through ideas about the audience. Several early analyses of soap opera make hypotheses about how women respond to the genre, and many later studies attempt to test these ideas (see Moores 1993: 39–49). Thus the Tuebingen/Volkswagen study explicitly tests some of Modleski's formulation (Seiter et al. 1989a), while Andrea Press asks questions drawn from a variety of cultural studies work (1991a). Ien Ang (1985) offers both an extensive reading of *Dallas* and an audience study. This work must, however, be seen in the broader context. Thus while feminist researchers were particularly concerned with the way women 'read' or enjoyed television programmes, there was a new attention to audience 'decoding' in general, as any review account of media research in the 1980s indicates (for example Corner 1991 or Moores 1993).

Feminist reception studies thus have to be understood both within and as influential on a more general 'turn to the audience' characteristic of popular media study in the late 1970s and 1980s. This turn to the audience, noted, with different inflections and in the process of different arguments, by Ang (1989b), Curran (1991), Morley (1989), Schröder (1987), and Corner (1999), emerged from two quite distinct traditions, those of the 'Uses and Gratifications' paradigm within mass communications/communication studies and the rather more heterogeneous body of work known as cultural studies. With different histories, aims, methodologies, and research agendas, a series of projects—most notably the international Liebes and Katz *Dallas* project (Katz and Liebes 1985; Liebes and Katz 1990), the Morley *Nationwide* (1980) and *Family Television* (1986) surveys, and Radway's 1984 romance-reader research—were conducted. Indeed, one of the key ways in which we can understand the impact of feminist work on the academy is through the gendering of the audience which is accomplished through this scholarship. While the focus on a female audience is not historically unusual (Allen 1987), the new feminist work, as we shall see in more detail later, engaged sympathetically with the figure of the female viewer and has had significant impact on the academic understanding of who the audience is and how it should be conceptualized. It has also opened up discussion of domestic space and the social relations of viewing, as we see particularly in the work of Lynn Spigel and Ann Gray (Spigel 1992; Gray 1992a; Morley 1992). However, as the empirical work with female audiences has accumulated, the analytic significance of the categories

4 For example, in both David Buckingham's work (1987) and Dorothy Hobson's later work (1990), the research topic is partly, precisely, talking about soap opera.

of 'women' and 'gender' have become more problematic. As in so many other areas of scholarship, the primarily political objective of putting women 'in' generates a complex set of philosophical, epistemological, and methodological issues.⁵ Two nodal points of argument can be isolated.

First, and posed most challengingly by Ien Ang and Joke Hermes in what was commissioned as a review essay on gender media and reception study, there is the question of whether categories of gender can be used to interpret audience behaviour without making essentialist assumptions about the characteristics of gender (1991). In a discussion which focuses on seemingly incompatible findings about the articulation of class and gender in the work of Press (1990) and the Tuebingen study (Seiter et al. 1989a), Ang and Hermes make a radical critique of the use of socio-demographic variables such as class and gender in the interpretation of audience data, arguing that the concentration on female audiences in particular has tended to produce gender as an *a priori* category. While wishing to retain notions of a social world structured in significant difference, they argue for a radical contextualism and particularism in the analysis of data, and the absolute historical contingency of the articulation of all variables such as gender.

While many scholars stop short of Ang and Hermes's absolute contingency—possibly, partly, out of pragmatic panic at how and when to introduce a category such as gender in an analysis if it can only be allowed to emerge *post facto* in any particular specified historical context—their argument is both a strong version and symptomatic of a more general contemporary anxiety about how to 'do' gender in media analysis. For example, Cathy Schwitthenberg argues that gender and genre have to be disarticulated in feminist audience studies otherwise it is impossible to understand, for instance, women who like sports, or lesbian women who defy feminine norms of beauty (Schwitthenberg 1994).

The second recurrent problem in feminist reception study, again, not a problem specific to this scholarly field, is that of the historical and categorical exclusions hidden in second-wave feminism's category 'women'. Here, as elsewhere, it has been those speaking, or forced to speak, in the name of 'difference' who have highlighted the homogeneity of 'women' as Trinh T. Minh-ha elegantly argues in her 'Difference: "A Special Third World Women Issue"' (Trinh 1989). Jacqueline Bobo and Evelyn Reid have produced accounts of black women viewers' responses in the US and UK (Bobo 1988; Reid 1989),

⁵ This issue is clearly not one limited to television audience studies. For discussion in other fields, see e.g. Scott (1988) on history, Miller (1993) on literature, and Pollock on art history (1993).

while Bobo and Seiter have written an extended analysis of the reproduction of racist patterning in, for example, the selection of samples for ethnographic research (1991). Class has proved somewhat more comfortable, at least superficially, to the mainly white researchers working in this field, although I will discuss this further in relation to another key issue, that of the relationship between researcher and researched, which is taken up at the end of the chapter. Studies of audiences have generally been studies of the domestic, and, as Bobo and Seiter have argued, of an ethnically specific domestic (1991). This picture is slightly altered by the burgeoning work on audiences as fans and fan identity as such, which would include Constance Penley's research on *Star Trek* fans and that of Lisa Lewis on fandom in general (Penley 1992; Lewis 1992). The public sphere is also addressed in the emerging US research on the reception of women rappers by young African-American women (Rose 1990; Roberts 1991) which perhaps adds substance to an argument that white feminist work in television has mainly stayed within the sphere of personal life and the domestic—of which, of course, soap opera is an exemplary instance.

There is thus a body of feminist ethnographic work on television that we can place in at least two contexts. First we can see this research as contributing to, and to some extent determining of, an increased concern with the audience in television and cultural studies. Secondly we can relate this work to feminist ethnographies of the feminine and the rendering visible of female experience. This latter field includes not only the directly relevant ethnographies of consumption, but also, for example, Ann Oakley's extensive sociologies of housework and maternity (Oakley 1974; 1981a), Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey's research on the socialization of young girls (1989), Ann Phoenix's investigation of the lives of young mothers (1991), Ruth Frankenburg's analysis of the experience of being a white woman (1993), and Beverley Skeggs's ethnographies of young white working-class women in the North of England (1997).⁶ While these ethnographies of femininity, as we can see from their topics, encompass a wide range of female experience, it is clear that a unifying thread of concern in all this work is the relationship between researcher and researched. That is, feminist research has been particularly attentive to the power relations of the ethnographic research encounter, although this attention, as the work of Ann Phoenix (1994) and Beverley Skeggs (1997) suggests, has historically been rather differently inflected through understandings of the differing significance of gender, class, and

6 There is a fascinating body of work published in the 1960s which anticipates the later concerns with ethnographies of feminine experience but which does not use explicitly feminist frameworks, e.g. Hannah Gavron's 1966 *The Captive Wife*, Nell Dunn's 1965 *Talking to Women*, and Sue Kaufman's 1968—although this is perhaps too late to be included here—*Diary of a Mad Housewife*.

ethnicity in the research process. Mainly because of the founding political aspiration of the unity of women ('sisterhood', in the currently deeply unfashionable terms of second-wave feminism), the relationship between researcher and researched has been a necessary and recurrent issue for feminist research, as indeed titles of articles which have made significant contributions to this debate indicate. For example, Ann Oakley offered a major challenge to the sociological conventions of interviewing research subject with her polemic 'Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms' (1981*b*). Angela McRobbie asked further questions about the role of the researcher in her piece 'The Politics of Feminist Research: Between Talk, Text and Action' (1982*b*). Janet Finch also poses questions about the responsibilities of the researcher: '“It's Great to Have Someone to Talk To”: The Ethics and Politics of Interviewing Women' (1984). Ann Phoenix, writing ten years later, offers a slightly different focus: 'Practising Feminist Research: The Intersection of Gender and “Race” in the Research Process' (1994).

So the commitment to the investigation of female experience and agency with which this chapter has been concerned has its own epistemological consequences. The researcher in this feminist work is implicated in the field of study much more directly than the visiting anthropologist or participant observer. Or, to put the epistemological issue plainly, the feminist researcher—as woman—recognized her implication in the research scenario much more explicitly than has sometimes been the case in both sociological and anthropological endeavour.⁷ As Ann Gray says quite unequivocally, after introducing autobiographical material about her own life, and particularly her class/gender origins:

I consider this shared position as quite crucial to the quality of the conversations that I had with the women and that the talk that ensued was, in most instances, enriched by that shared knowledge. To put it quite directly, I am a woman in my study. (1992*a*: 34)

This self-inscription within research destabilizes ideas of objective investigation and findings in a way which is comparable to, and often simultaneous with, the challenge other types of feminist research offered to established disciplines, the challenge Susan Bordo formulates as the argument that there is no such thing as a view from nowhere (Bordo 1990: 137). Clearly these ideas of the locatedness of all knowledge and the interrogation of existing paradigms offer inter-

⁷ In fact, of course, both sociology and anthropology have long histories of self-conscious research, as we see from debates in ethnomethodology, e.g. Clifford Geertz's responses to the critiques offered by contributors to Clifford and Marcus's (1986) *Writing Culture* (Geertz 1988).

connections between currents in, and influences of, feminist thought and more general contemporary challenges to existing regimes of knowledge.⁸ As writers such as Meaghan Morris (1988) and Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips (1992) have shown, the relationships between feminist and postmodern thought are complex and contradictory. However, in relation to the specific field of feminist ethnography it is worth noting that a particularly marked element of feminist writing in this area is the explicit inclusion of emotional response in the account of fieldwork. This ranges from the expressions of warmth, sympathy, and identification—of being women together—apparent in the work of the 1980s, to the more conflicted exploration of difference found in later work.

In tracing the feminist investigation of soap opera alongside the feminist revaluation of other women's genres, I have suggested that the profound ambivalence of second-wave feminism towards conventional cultures of femininity has not been sufficiently explored. This will be one of the tasks of this book. By implication, this argument fragments the rather unitary representation that this feminism currently attracts, but in contradictory ways. First, one could hypothesize that the faultline of class mobility through education for post-war girls might be particularly salient in understanding the virulence of the rejection of—and the compulsiveness of the return to—the mass cultures of the feminine. Perhaps also relevant here would be the significant presence, within British feminism, of white women with public school/Oxbridge educations. That is to say, the different class and ethnic experiences and cultures of femininity have been a recurrent, if sometimes unconscious, concern of second-wave British feminism. Secondly, when examining the ethnographies of female experience produced by these feminist researchers in the 1970s and 1980s one finds not only the commonalities of gendered experience, and what sometimes amounts to an assertion of the sameness of women, but in fact also a documentation of difference, the revelation that gender is lived out in specific circumstances. In the scrupulous discussion of methodology we find in, for example, the work of Hobson (1978*a*), McRobbie (1982*b*), and Gray (1992*a*), there is not just an epistemological challenge to the accepted ideas of what knowledge is and how it is produced. There is, simultaneously inscribed across texts which are concerned with the understanding of experience as gendered, a recognition of issues of power difference which can be understood as a metonymic inscription of class. As Ann Gray puts it, she is 'a woman in her study', and that shared experience is

8 The contradictory relationships between feminism and postmodernism are challengingly posed by Meaghan Morris (1988). Nicholson (1990) and Barrett and Phillips (1992) offer substantial engagement in the issues.

what contributes to the quality of her interviews, but of course, she also isn't, and that difference, at the moment of interview, is best understood through a sense of the 'gendering' of individual identity as never accomplished in isolation. Persons are never 'just' gendered. Gray *is* a woman *in* her study—but through education she has become the woman who conducts her study. Gray's retrospective description of undertaking research offers us a complex individual history of the interplay of class, gender, and ethnicity in a particular instance (Gray 1995). And it is this complex interplay which marks the interviews in Part III as the speakers recall what they thought they were doing when they turned to soap opera as an object of study.