

MEDIA, MODERNITY AND GENDER

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Introduction

Some years ago I defended looking at women's magazines through the eyes of the readers. Rather than reconstruct the magazine text through an academic analysis, I thought it was worthwhile to reconstruct what women's magazines are about by analyzing what the readers themselves say about them (Hermes 1995). This may sound like an obvious project. Popular culture is not, however, as contentious as it used to be. The introduction of new media, and most recently the explosive growth of the Internet, shows that modernist fears and anxieties on behalf of the masses and about popular culture have merely been lying dormant. In the Netherlands, as in many other countries, there has been much to do about children finding 'unsuitable' images on the net, not to mention the spread of child pornography. I take this to mean that 'modernist media criticism' is very much alive — brilliantly analyzed by Joli Jensen (1990) and now provocatively dealt with in Ulrike Wöhr's paper 'Discourses on media and modernity: Criticism of Japanese women's magazines in the 1920's and early 1930s. I would like to take the author up on her invitation to acknowledge and reexamine some of my own assumptions, values, and beliefs regarding the media as mirrored in the historical voices she has brought to life as well as discuss the structure of modernist media criticism especially in relation to issues of gender.

Women's magazines, their readers and their critics

The critics of early Japanese women's magazines portrayed by Ulrike Wöhr — so indignant about the content of the commercial journals — hardly ever brought their charges against a specific magazine or case. Wöhr quotes socialist critic Yamakawa Kikue who owns up to lacking the perseverance to read anything so despicably low-grade (Yamakawa 1921, quoted by Wöhr in this volume). To know the magazines apparently was enough to condemn them; even less reason then to find out what actual readers did with these-despicable-texts. From a modernist perspective it is not necessary to talk with or observe readers closely. Analysis, even a cursory analysis of the text, will do nicely when one wants to say something that concerns both the magazines and their readers. From my own, more postmodern point of view, it is difficult to grant critics the right to simply dismiss what quickly became a highly popular genre. Of course, we will have to step into the modernist critics' strictly organized evaluative frameworks in which popular culture forms spell nothing but trouble, and in which the com-

mercial is a sign of degeneracy or even conspiracy, if we are to gain a deeper understanding of both historic and current formations of taste and culture. Several questions beg answers. (1) What strategic goals were served by condemning the content of the early Japanese women's magazines as overly sexual and unreliable? (2) Is it still possible for left and right wing critics to bond over issues concerning women and a women's media, whereas in other respects they would not want to share the same side? (3) How are we to approach today's media and the panic that arises over the content and possible effects, given this particular piece of media history?

Both nationalist and socialist critics sought a form of control over the social and cultural changes Japan found itself in at the beginning of the 20th century. It appears that the new women's magazines offered themselves as a particularly vulnerable and controllable area. Critics interested in developing an agenda of change seemed more than happy to locate an area with little cultural status of its own to use as an example, to imprint a set of new and developing cultural values on. Their strategy seems to have relied on robbing the magazines of any cultural status whatsoever and to lock them into dichotomies of literary versus commercial, of high versus low culture. According to Ulrike Wöhr, the magazines generally were charged with being commercial and representative of low culture. More specifically, they were considered vulgar and overly sexualized, as well as a health hazard in their prescription of home remedies. Similar charges resonate in European women's history. Let me offer some snapshots to illustrate my point.

Think of the British outrage over young women's magazines and their strong focus on sex, which is thought to harm young women. (Girls' magazine *More's* 'position of the month' which offers graphic suggestions for sexual intercourse between a woman and a man may serve as an example in the 1990s. From a feminist point of view, *More's* insistence on 'your (the reader's) pleasure' is also interesting; cf. Kehily 1999). Explicit interest in sex by women, however veiled, is still an unsettling thought in a society defined by unequal gender roles. How much less of a focus on sexuality would have been needed in the context of Japan in the midst of the shift from a traditional to a modern society in the early 20th century, to suggest this as a point of departure for an engaged and concerned critic.

The health hazard charge suggests another snapshot: Modernism coinciding with the technologicalization and institutionalization of what formerly constituted a part of women's oral culture and social networks. Midwifery, for example, made way to giving birth in hospitals and herbal medicine was systematically banned by the growing medical profession (cf. Ehrenreich and English 1979). Processes of modernization invest in a changing balance of control away from rural and local structures, onto the emerging nation states. In matters of culture, as much as in matters of administration, processes of centralization demand that the focus shift to issues concerning the people as a whole, rather than as identifiable social groups with their own particular history and place in society. Women's magazines targeted all women, thus building an audience that had not existed before, and which made it possible to

address more directly questions of taste and cultural value in relation to the anonymous mass that needed governing and guiding.

Oral knowledge and women's culture suffered under the processes of nation-state building. Modernist rule sought efficiency and quality control where regimes of tradition had reigned in more diverse and local forms and degrees of efficacy. Older knowledge, however, did not just disappear. In part, it found a new home in 'bad' commercial media, one of the only places to go, given that feminist magazines often sided with the modernist wish for self-improvement and elevation and turned away from conventional practices (White 1977; Wöhr, in this volume). It is interesting that in the Japanese case men also comprised the readership of these magazines and apparently had access to the same knowledge. Charges levied against male readers suggest that they used women's magazines more or less as one would use pornography. (Several decades later this rang true as an accusation often leveled at gay men reading *Playgirl*.) For today's media critic, this is surely a sign that regardless of the particular historical context, only a small number of recurring charges can be laid at the readers' doors. For men, it is improper to engage with women's culture as 'fellow-women' or as consumers of women-as-objects. Women are charged with becoming victims of their reading matter, as well as being intellectual lightweights.

It would go too far to suggest that commercial media content is what audiences want, but it surely is what they make do with. Aside from differences in timing and appearance, thematically, at least, there are overlaps between the histories of the commercial media in Japan and Europe. I wonder whether the early Japanese women's magazines changed their style and contents so as to pass muster, both with those of a more traditional ilk and also with their socialist critics? I suspect that would have been impossible. Given the self-imposed task of feminists, socialists, educators, and in the Japanese case, the traditionalists/nationalists, popular culture would have been as much of a threat in practice as an opportunity for the elevation of the masses in an ideal society. Popular culture, to invoke Gramsci (1973), can only be popular if it has something to offer those invited to partake of it. Hegemony always involves the loss of total control on the side of the powers-that-be, an opening up of the contract between rulers and ruled to allow for some of what the ruled like. Gramsci may not have been thinking about sex in women's magazines, but with the benefit of hindsight, we can see how some notion of sexuality is and was probably necessary to break patriarchal rule.

Surely, the condemnation of the content of the early Japanese women's magazines served as a strategic goal for media critics. At the expense of the magazines, the critics carved out a role and place for themselves. However weird this may sound, the actual goals of the magazines may have served their diverse audiences in a way far beyond the reach of media critics. Research by Sabine Frühstück (1997, quoted by Wöhr in this volume) on pre-war sexology in Japan suggests that for sexologists the magazine served as a forum, a means of communication between readers and colleagues. Like the media critics, the sexologists were also critical of the magazines and used them to their own advantage. The fact that the charges leveled at the

magazines concerned the oversexualized content and unreliability, can be seen as the critics' expert sense of two of the major preoccupations of modernity: questions of gender and equality, and questions of biopolitics. In the modern nation-state, both were on their way to becoming a governmental and individual responsibility (cf. Donzelot 1979; Foucault 1979 and 1980).

Given the centrality of the issue of gender and women's place in modernity, or, as Andreas Huyssen puts it, woman as modernism's other (Huyssen 1986), it is perhaps less than surprising that left and right wing critics manage to bond over issues to do with women, women's media, and women's sexuality. In the debate about pornography, a similar alliance between feminists and arch-conservatives can be found (cf. Coward 1982). Thus, we need to approach today's media, and the panic over its content and possible effects, informed by what we can learn from this intriguing piece of media history about gender, media and media criticism.

Modernist and postmodernist media criticism and gender

In response to Ulrike Wöhr's historical research, I have implicitly juxtaposed two types of media criticism: modernist and postmodernist media criticism, in order to see what a critic may achieve by using a modernist frame of reference. Apart from dismissing any obligation to closely examine what has been deemed low culture, the critic secures a place of respectability for her or himself on the 'good' side of the dichotomy. Unintentional though it may be, modernist media critics also build onto a particular regulation of gender in society.

Generally, modernist media criticism is concerned with the public sphere, rather than with popular culture (Corner 1991). A strong interest in news and current affairs exists in 'citizenship' issues. Opposed to this is what Corner calls the popular culture project that deals with issues of pleasure and resistance, and issues of gender (also see Hermes 1997). The popular culture project is of more recent vintage than the modernist public sphere project. The feminists in Ulrike Wöhr's paper who criticize commercial women's magazines may well have faced a situation in which there was not much place to define femininity in relation to popular culture, outside of defining femininity as either traditional or corrupted.

Within modernist media criticism femininity only displays negative qualities. It is associated with passivity, emotionalism, irrationality, gullibility, consumerism: all that is opposite of 'upright' citizenship (and that deviates from the male norm). Following Huyssen, the feminine is that which must be repressed. In modernist media criticism's abhorrence of commercialization and consumerism it is in fact the specter of the feminine that we see. In a 1992 study of Western media and commercialization, Jay Blumler speaks of a commercial deluge — the end of the role of broadcasting in encouraging reasoned argument in civic and electoral choice. With a (by now) common sleight of hand, Blumler rhetorically equates all the evils that could befall the public broadcasting system with 'feminine' qualities. Modernist media criticism reigns.

What would a 'postmodern' answer entail? What can be learned from Ulrike Wöhr's historical reconstruction? Do we, now, today have terms available to speak of women and media that go beyond a highly restricted gender vocabulary? Is it possible to divorce 'women' from 'passivity' and 'consumerism,' from the counter-productive entanglements of sex and sensuality? These are the questions we are faced with in coming to terms with today's women's media, and with media content in general. Popular culture is still pervasively equated with low culture, even if the cultural condemnation of old has lessened considerably. I have a feeling that the critical project still needs 'gendering.' The double inscription of woman as hope and threat, and the media as an educational and idealist tool as well as despoiler of the masses continues to hold true. How then can we deal with popular culture, with women and sexuality?

One possibility is celebrating the resistance of audiences against attempts to bind them into the critics' vocabularies. This is not a strategy without its problems because it leaves the critics' discourse in place and unchallenged. I would, therefore, be more in favor of a 'gendering' of the debate today, and of the positions in it. We need to recognize the preconceived notions and the genderedness of the notions involved. When quality equals a male norm, when critics must speak from a meta-level unable to invoke their own femininity for fear of being discounted, not much progress will be made. The continual reinscription of women = femininity = debased, low culture = commercial media culture needs to be broken up. In the case of the early Japanese magazines, the West is inscribed in the position of the feminine and the commercial, which in the West we like to project onto specific others, such as, in the case of Europe, the United States, or, more specifically, Hollywood.

Modernism is the cultural force of globalization and it has shown itself to be particularly flexible in taking up local contradictions and conflicts to accommodate an ongoing capitalist development logic. The international success of the American soap opera, for example, which literally was produced to sell soap, has led to local soap opera productions in over a hundred different countries according to a recent exhibition in the The Hague Municipal Museum (Gemeentemuseum 1997). It is not the content of the soaps that poses the problem. It is the modernist logic that equates soap operas with a lack of cultural quality, and labels the soaps as a specifically 'feminine' genre, that needs to be broken up. The key to such a breaking up is that a blanket dismissal of popular media forms not be permitted. The only thing we can be sure of in those cases is that something entirely different is the matter. The most fascinating part of Ulrike Wöhr's paper is, in fact, her discussion of the various guises 'modern women' assumed in pre-war Japan. From the 'new women' to the 'modan gâru' and back to traditional women, we glimpse the full spectrum of positions of women that needed to be consolidated, or even legitimized in fast-changing times. As Wöhr shows, there lies the key to understanding the fierce attacks on the unfortunate women's magazines, much more than in their content or in how readers used them.

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