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by Patrice Petro

"the fear of the vulgar is the obverse of the fear of excellence, and both are aspects of the fear of difference . . ."[1]

The final session of the 1984 Society for Cinema Studies Conference held in Madison, Wisconsin was devoted to the question of "The Place of Television in Film Studies." The question of television's "place" in film studies was nevertheless soon displaced by an intense debate over the "proper" object for scholarly attention, a debate which encouraged some conference participants to voice their fears about the precarious status of film within the academy and to express their anxieties over television's potential threat to that status.

To begin with, some conference participants feared that once television was incorporated into film studies, a return to various positivist methodologies would soon follow, thereby undermining the more sophisticated approaches to spectatorship and textuality carried over from continental philosophy and literary theory to film studies proper. Furthermore, the emphasis upon content analysis, audience survey, and controlled experiment in mainstream television study, in short, the "number crunching" empiricism of communication research, was seen by some to threaten the already beleaguered position of film study within the university by moving it further away from the humanities and in the direction of the social sciences.

In addition to this was a second, less articulated, fear that the study of the "vulgar," popularized medium of television would undercut the artistic and educational goals of film study within the university. In support of this fear, and serving as further evidence to indict television as medium, were quoted the apparently different modes of reception assumed to follow from "viewing a film" and "watching television." As many theorists have pointed out, when viewing a film, the spectator centers attention on the screen, becoming absorbed in the narrative and with the characters. When watching television, however, viewing seems to be marked by discontinuous attention, by the spectator's participation in several activities at once in which televiewing may not even rank as third in importance.[2] Drawing upon these assumed differences between perception and spectatorship in film and television viewing, the debate over television's place in film studies came to rest upon the (unexamined) assumption that while film

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encourages attention to the work itself, television merely contributes to the tendency toward distracted and indiscriminate reception.

It would be hasty to dismiss the fears outlined here as entirely illusory or to generalize about all film scholars' tunnel vision with respect to their discipline (thus overlooking the extremely productive work on television carried out by film scholars in both Britain and the United States).[3] It nevertheless seems to me that the anxiety expressed over the prospect and consequences of positivist methodologies inundating film studies is rather misplaced. For a start, not only have such methodologies long existed in film studies (as represented by the work of I. C. Jarvie, for instance), but they have in no significant way obstructed the development or refinement of film theoretical concerns. It is for this reason that the second fear, expressed in terms of television "debasing" the cultural and educational goals of film studies, seems to me highly suggestive in its assumption of what, precisely, constitutes knowledge, education, and value. As Hélène Cixous has remarked, every theory of culture, "every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems—everything, that is, that's spoken, everything that's organized as discourse, art, religion, family, language, everything that seizes us, everything that acts on us—it is all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that can only be sustained by means of a difference posed by cultural discourses as 'natural,' the difference between activity and passivity."[4]

The difference between art and mass culture—understood by means of a "natural" opposition between activity and passivity—has long been assumed in our theories of culture. And it is remarkable how theoretical discussions of art and mass culture are almost always accompanied by gendered metaphors which link "masculine" values of production, activity, and attention with art, and "feminine" values of consumption, passivity, and distraction with mass culture. To be sure, this dichotomy is not exclusive to those seeking to valorize high art. As Tania Modleski has persuasively argued, even theorists of mass culture continually make "mass culture into the 'other' of whatever, at any given moment, they happen to be championing—and, moreover, to denigrate that other primarily because it allegedly provides pleasure to the consumer."[5] Given the tenacity of hierarchical gender oppositions both in our culture and our theoretical discourses, it is not surprising that debates over the "place" of television in film studies should echo the oppositions between activity and passivity when assigning value to different representational practices. What is surprising is that some film scholars assign a place to television outside the domain of legitimate culture, outside the arena of academic respectability, particularly since this was (and in some cases, continues to be) precisely the "place" assigned to cinema by educators, intellectuals, and artists.

In the following discussion, I would like to suggest possible reasons for the attribution of "feminized" values (with their implicitly pejorative connotations) to television by analyzing developments within film criticism as well as within critical theories of television. I must emphasize, however, that I am not concerned to argue that either television or film is in fact "feminized." While at least one

film scholar has valorized television as psychically and essentially feminine,[6] thereby providing television with an ontology to match the masculine ontology of film provided by Baudry and Metz, I believe that this kind of approach not only collapses the historical and theoretical issues raised by television as a social technology, but also replicates the very terms which ally feminity with passivity, consumption, and distraction. In my view, it is precisely these terms which must be called into question if television theorists are to avoid reproducing the problems already encountered by theorists of film. Indeed, what I would like to argue is that before we can begin to theorize the historical and perceptual difference between film and television viewing, we need first to scrutinize our critical vocabularies which assign hierarchical and gender-specific value to difference. My aim in this essay will thus be less to advance a new theory of television than to demonstrate how critics of mass culture, from civic reformers to postmodern theorists, employ gender-specific oppositions in order to evaluate the differences between art and mass culture. In this way, I hope to suggest why debate over the "place" of television in film studies may have been necessary to begin with.

Cinema and Mass Culture. Since its beginnings, the cinema has been interrogated in almost every Western society for its function and meaning in culture. Rather than presume to give an extensive account of the various discourses on cinema as a manifestation of mass culture, I will merely suggest a pervasive preoccupation with gender-oppositions in mass culture criticism. In fact, before turning to television directly, it is useful to look at how debates over television have not only borrowed from, but have also virtually replicated, earlier debates over film.

Quite consciously, I have chosen to draw my examples from Anglo-American and German mass cultural criticism and to divide various approaches into three major areas: 1) moral and educational discourses—concerned to discuss cinema's effects upon children (those presumably unable to distinguish "reality" from "fantasy") and marked by an analogous inability to distinguish representation from presentation, given their assumption that film maintains an immediate and direct relation to the real; 2) artistic and intellectual discourses—generally concerned to distinguish "artistic" from "popular" practices and to defend the status of art by setting it in opposition to mass culture's triviality and vulgarity; and 3) political and cultural discourses—usually involving critics on the political left and distinguished by an attempt to discern the social and ideological effects of mass-produced forms on audiences themselves produced by an increasingly industrialized culture. At this point I must emphasize that these categories are not mutually exclusive, since moral evaluations of the cinema are never confined to the discourses of reformers, just as analyses of the effects of industrial culture are not limited to critics on the left.

I must also make explicit my reasons for privileging examples from Anglo-American and German mass cultural criticism. Most obviously, institutional and historical factors have made possible the interchange between Anglo-American

and German intellectuals (e.g., the impact of the German university on American intellectual life in the late nineteenth century and the influence of the Institute for Social Research on American sociology and communications research in the 1940s and 1950s). Furthermore, it seems to me that early German film theory may have much to offer contemporary film and television scholars.[7] Without a doubt, problems of translation (both literal and cultural) have often stood in the way of sophisticated assessments of early Germany theory; the narrow and pre-dominantly formal understanding of that theory as either "realist" (Kracauer), "modernist" (Adorno), or "postmodernist" (Benjamin) may indeed be attributed to this. And although early German film theory does not escape the patriarchal bias found in its Anglo-American counterpart, I do believe that it holds out perhaps the most promise for any historical analysis of perception and identification in film and television media. For instance, Benjamin's discussion of aura and its demise provides an important historical and ideological explanation (rather than a formal or epistemological one) for the current denigration of television by scholars who have only recently succeeded in restoring aura to the study of film art.

The writings of American educators and reformers in the early twentieth century are especially revealing in their construction of the differences between "education" and "mass culture" through their reference to the "demands" of national traditions and the "seductions" of popular entertainment forms. As early as 1926, Donald Young, a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, argued that the cinema was helping to promote a "reckless appreciation of true values," and this precisely because it was designed to be cheap, available, and easy to understand.[8] Following from the observations advanced by Young, and popular-izing the research of prominent sociologists and psychologists, Henry James Foreman, author of *Our Movie-Made Children* (1933), explicitly distinguished between the "rigors" of national education and the "promiscuity" of the cinema. Foreman acknowledged that the cinema may one day provide instruction more valuable "than the present text-book variety." For the time being, however, he believed the cinema to be "vast, haphazard, promiscuous . . . [and] ill-chosen" in its output, and thus "extremely likely to create a haphazard, promiscuous, and undesireable national consciousness."[9]

The concern of American academics and reformers with regulating the cinema for the good of "national consciousness" found similar expression in the writings of German educators and reformers. As Miriam Hansen forcefully dem-onstrates in her recent essay, "Early Silent Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?," educators and literary commentators in Germany in the early twentieth century aimed to establish the educational mission of the cinema by curbing what they saw as the explicitly sexual excesses inherent in its appeal.[10] Cautioning against the irrational tendencies of mass tastes, German cinema reformers specifically warned against what they perceived as the increasing—and much deplored— sexualization of cinema audiences. The high percentage of women in film au-diences, combined with an apparently sensual and intoxicating atmosphere of

the cinema auditorium, was perceived, in fact, as such an alarming phenomenon that, as Hansen explains, the fear of mass culture was translated into a fear of feminity more generally, "of female presence on both a pragmatic and metaphoric level."[11] Quoting from Alfred Döblin, Hansen makes this point especially clear:

> Inside the pitch-black, low ceilinged space a rectangular screen glares over a monster of an audience, a white eye fixating the mass with a monotonous gaze. Couples making out in the background are carried away and withdraw their undisciplined fingers. Children wheezing with consumption quietly shake with the chills of evening fever; badly smelling workers with bulging eyes; women in musty clothes, heavily made-up prostitutes leaning forward, forgetting to adjust their scarves. Here you can see "panem et circenses" fulfilled; spectacle as essential as bread; the bullfight as popular need.[12]

As this quote from Döblin suggests, the polemic against the cinema's "monstrous," "devouring" pleasures was not limited to civic-minded reformers alone: A number of established artists and intellectuals also decried the cinema's function as "vulgar" alternative to the cultural heritage of genuine art. Franz Pfemfert, editor of the expressionist journal *Aktion,* for example, called the cinema "barbaric," arguing that while "the torchbearers of culture hasten to new heights, the people . . . listen to the babbling of the cinema and place a new record on the phonograph."[13] Significantly, many German artists and intellectuals directed their attack against the cinema by way of an attack on the American film, that form of cinematic representation not only emblematic of mass, industrialized culture, but also most threatening to the maintenance of a uniquely German cultural heritage. As one German publisher wrote in 1926: "The number of people who see films and don't read books has reached into the millions . . . They all surrender to American tastes, they conform, they become uniform. The American film is the new world militarism. It is more dangerous than the Prussian would militarism. It doesn't devour single individuals, it devours whole peoples."[14] Not only is a dividing line drawn here between book culture and film culture, between a traditional mode of written expression and an emerging mode of visual expression, but it is also remarkable how the metaphorized threat slides from the masculine, the militaristic, and the national to the feminine, the insidious, and the all-enveloping. (The comparison between residual and emerging modes of representation, and the values attached to each, will, of course, find similar articulation when television is discussed as a threat to the dominance of film.)

Metaphors that refer to the cinema's insatiable appetite, to its appeal to the most promiscuous and undiscerning of tastes, can also be discerned in the writings of leftist cultural critics. As Heide Schlüpmann points out in her brilliant essay, "Kinosucht" (literally, "Cinema Addiction"), the writings of Kracauer, Benjamin, and Adorno are instructive both in their attack on bourgeois notions of artistic value and in their simultaneous contempt for "feminized" reception.[15] For example, in contrast to Kracauer's later work, *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), where mass culture is associated with a specifically male mob psychology, Kracauer's early writings often focus upon female spectators and the potentially liberating

effects of mass culture. (This is not to say, however, that femininity and liberation are ever equated, a point to which I will return shortly.) As Kracauer writes in his 1927 essay, "The Mass Ornament":

> What is entertainment for the masses is judged by intellectuals as distraction of the masses. Contrary to such a position, I would argue that the aesthetic pleasure gained from the ornamental mass movements is legitimate . . . . When great amounts of reality-content are no longer visible in our world, art must make do with what is left . . . . No matter how low one rates the value of the mass ornament, its level of reality is still above that of artistic productions which cultivate obsolete noble sentiments in withered forms—even when they have no further significance.[16]

As Kracauer makes clear, the perceptual "distraction" structured by the mass media carries with it a double meaning. On the one hand, distraction in the cinema is "progressive," since it translates forms of industrial organization into a sensory, perceptual, and highly self-conscious discourse: "in the pure externality of the cinema, the public meets itself, and the discontinuous sequence of splendid sense impressions reveals to them their own daily reality. Would it be concealed to them, it couldn't be attacked or changed."[17] On the other hand, distraction in the cinema contains "reactionary" tendencies, since it encourages passivity and mindless consumption on the part of the spectator which work to block the imagination and "distract" from the necessity to change the present order: "reason is impeded . . . when the masses into which it should penetrate yield to emotions provided by the godless, mythological cult."[18] The emotionality and irrationality of the cinematic spectacle, those apparently "reactionary" effects of distraction, are in turn linked by Kracauer to an overidentified and specifically female mode of spectatorship. As he argues in his essay, "The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies" (1927): "Many people sacrifice themselves nobly because they are too lazy to rebel; many tears are shed and they only flow because to cry is sometimes easier than to think . . . . Clandestinely the little shopgirls wipe their eyes and powder their noses before the lights come up."[19]

In this passage, Kracauer implies that a truly progressive cinema must encourage an intellectual distance if the spectator is to guard against the lure of a passive, emotional, or "feminized" reception. Kracauer's emphasis upon an active or intellectual stance toward cinematic distraction, moreover, clearly informs the discussion of mass culture one finds in the writings of Benjamin and Brecht.[20] While all three theorists sought to redeem mass culture, and this in spite of the apparent irrationalism of its appeal, their all too easy linkage of irrationalism with the feminine poses a serious problem for any reevaluation of their writings.

It should nevertheless be remembered that early German film theorists directed their attention to the social function of representation and thus their analyses of mass culture remain far more dialectical, far more historical, than what one finds in much contemporary film theory. For example, in their well-known essay, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," Jean-Louis Comolli and Paul Nar-

boni restate the distinction between art and mass culture one finds in the writings of early German film theorists, only now this distinction is displaced onto a formal opposition between "radical practice" and "classical Hollywood cinema," where Hollywood cinema becomes virtually synonomous with "ideology," with mass culture as the expression of a thoroughly degraded consciousness.[21] In marked contrast to early German film theorists, Comolli and Narboni also maintain that the perceptions afforded by mainstream cinema simply reproduce a closed-system, a "mystified," "illusory," and one-dimensional perceptual experience: "The notion of a public and its tastes was created by the ideology to justify and perpetuate itself. And this public can only express itself via the thought-patterns of ideology. The whole thing is a closed-circuit, endlessly repeating the same illusion. . . . Nothing in these films jars against the ideology, or the audience's mystification by it. They are very reassuring for audiences for there is no difference between the ideology they meet every day and the ideology on the screen."[22]

To be sure, Comolli and Narboni recognize that some "classical" films do escape the dominant ideology in which they are inscribed. Nevertheless, because they conceive of classical cinema as a monolith and a closed system, without any attention to the dynamics of reception, they must resort to text-bound notions in order to theorize that which is transgressed; i.e., that which ruptures, displaces, or disperses the "false and easy pleasures" of the Hollywood system is seen as a strictly formal gesture. However formalistic Comolli's and Narboni's theory of perception in the cinema may now seem, their understanding of transgressive practice continues to hold sway in even the most sophisticated of film theories. Stephen Heath, for example, defines the classical system as that which regulates, binds, and unifies the viewing subject. And fundamental to this binding, this all-consuming—again, "devouring"—process, is the system of suture, defined by Heath, somewhat unguardedly, as a "stitching or typing as in the surgical joining of the lips of a wound."[23] Heath theorizes an aesthetics able to transgress or "rupture" this dominant visual economy through recourse to a modernist practice which radically exposes the contradictions or "gaps" in the classical system. To quote Heath, once denied the pleasures of unity, coherence, and binding in, "the individual as spectator loses his epicentral role and disappears . . . 'he is no longer a simple consumer, he must also produce' . . . the spectator, that is, is to be divided, displaced, pulled into the radical exteriority of his/her process as subject which poses the construction of subjectivity in the objective contradictions of the class struggle."[24] Heath's emphasis upon work and production, and his invocation of the mutilated self in the service of the class struggle, serve as explicit contrast to the unified, consuming product of bourgeois ideology. The gendered metaphors here are clear: masculinity, production, and the divided self are again valorized in opposition to femininity, consumption, and the unified body.

The modernist and explicitly formalist impulse of Heath's argument has recently been questioned by theorists of postmodernism who are skeptical of claims for the transgressive or negative potential of mass cultural forms.[25] And yet even postmodern theorists tend to reproduce rigidly text-bound distinctions

between spectatorial perceptions of "unity" (or realism), "transgression" (or modernism) and "dispersion" (or postmodernism). In an essay which concludes a volume dedicated to Frankfurt School debates, for example, Fredric Jameson argues that since modernism has "become the dominant style of commodity production," it has now lost its political, contestatory, and perceptual value.[26] "In these circumstances," Jameson writes, "there is some question whether the ultimate renewal of modernism, the final dialectical subversion of the now automatized conventions of an aesthetic of perceptual revolution, might not simply be . . . realism itself! For when modernism and its accompanying techniques of 'estrangement' have become the dominant style whereby the consumer is reconciled with capitalism, the fragmentation itself needs to be 'estranged' and corrected by a more totalizing way of viewing phenomena."[27] In a more recent essay, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Jameson checks the utopia of this realist solution and argues against all forms of mass culture which he sees as debasing the critical or emancipatory potential of art. "The erosion of the older distinction between high-culture and so-called mass or popular culture," Jameson now writes, "is perhaps the most distressing development of all from an academic standpoint, which has traditionally had a vested interest in preserving a realm of high or elite culture against the surrounding environment of philistinism, of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture, and in transmitting difficult and complex skills of reading, listening, and seeing to its initiates."[28]

Given the history of mass culture criticism, Jameson's remarks hardly seem original, reproducing as they do the familiar distinctions between art's "complex" and "difficult" skills and mass culture's "cheap" and "easy" pleasures which consume, incorporate, and trivialize everything. At this point we might want to question the rigid distinctions between art and mass culture which organize our critical discourses. More precisely, we may even want to ask whether mass culture is really as monolithic and all-consuming as it has been frequently constructed to be, or whether, in fact, it is mass cultural *criticism* that has a vested interest in consuming and trivializing the different experiences of mass cultural reception. Before answering this question directly, I would now like to turn to television and to the discourses generated by this mass cultural form, perhaps considered to be the most vulgar and most implicated in the "environment of philistinism" that Jameson describes.

Television and Mass Culture. "Television," writes Jerry Mander, "has so enveloped and entered us, it is hard for most of us to remember that it was scarcely a generation ago that there was no such thing as television."[29] Mander's use of the metaphor of penetration to describe and condemn television as medium evokes an audience for television that is passive, vulnerable, and inherently "feminized." And not only is Mander's discourse representative of a great deal of television criticism, but it also reaffirms the real and metaphoric fear of femininity previously articulated by critics of cinema — a fear that simultaneously

directs itself against women as viewers and against the perceptual distraction assumed to follow from mass cultural reception.

The earliest studies of television, for example, were conducted by sociologists and psychologists concerned with uncovering the effects of television violence on children, on those viewers most easily "seduced" by aggressive behavior presented on the screen.[30] Similar to early studies of the cinema, early studies of television aimed to intervene in the shaping of consumer tastes so as to regulate television programs and to educate television viewers by presenting "themes and characterizations which are morally and socially more worthwhile."[31] What "morally" and "socially" worthwhile might have meant to early television reformers may be gleaned from the response of one television producer to the pressures for television regulation. Worthington Miner, executive producer of National Telefilm Associates, wrote in 1961 that any censorship of televisual reality will merely effect the return of a repressed, and presumably more detrimental, violence than that which currently organizes social relations:

> When all searching into politics, religion, and sex is removed—when every "damn" and "hell" is gone—when every Italian is no longer a "wop" and every Negro is no longer a "nigger"—when every gangster is renamed Adams or Bartlett, and every dentist an incipient Schweitzer, when indeed, every advertiser and account executive smiles—what is left? For this the censor must answer. What is left? Synthetic hogwash and violence! Shot through the guts, the head, or the back—the bloodier the better—Nielsen and Trendex demand it! Let woman blast her man in the face with a shotgun—but please, no cleavage. Tears? Oh, yes—lots of tears—for the poor misunderstood woman, or man, who just happened on the side to be selling heroin—or themselves. And in the daytime—Woman! The backbone of the home, the family, the business, the works. Oh, yes, within the censor's acceptance, the woman is forever a giant of integrity, loyalty, force—while generally misunderstood and abused. Man—a poor, fumbling, well-meaning idiot—or a martyr. This is what the censor declares every American adolescent should know about his father.[32]

The racism and sexism of Miner's remarks are outrageous in their very explicitness. And yet the conservatism implicit in Miner's belief that television programs and social relations are best left the way they are can also be detected in the writings of less hysterical television commentators. Paul Robinson, professor of history and author of an essay entitled "TV Can't Educate," reverts to the familiar distinctions between "education" and "entertainment" in order to argue that attempts to regulate or promote educational values through TV are fundamentally misguided since television is "structurally unsuited to learning." In learning, Robinson maintains, "one must be able to freeze the absorption of fact or proposition at any moment to make mental comparisons." And since television is always "a matter of seconds, minutes, and hours . . . it can never teach." Significantly, Robinson does not confine his critical remarks to the educational pretensions of TV, nor to television alone. "There is a new form of slumming among intellectuals," Robinson writes, "watching 'bad' (i.e. commercial) TV and

even writing books about it." This trend, Robinson argues, should not be taken seriously, for if television and film are equipped to "entertain, divert, above all to amuse," they cannot provide the time or absorption required for true knowledge. The opposition between the absorption of learning and the distraction of television thus leads Robinson to conclude that there is, in fact, "only one way to learn: by reading."[33] (Following this line of argument, one wonders why universities require professors to lecture at all.)

Robinson's argument clearly aims to preserve the traditional boundaries that define educational value in the academy and, in this, his position is hardly much less conservative than Miner's. Furthermore, it is important to stress that the terms and oppositions which organize Robinson's discourse also pervade writings on television by critics on the political left. For example, in his essay, "Of Happiness and Of Despair We Have No Measure," Ernest van den Haag, a critic indebted to the pessimistic strain of Frankfurt School theory, also denies any educational function to television since education is itself implicated in the logic of commodity production. Van den Haag goes one step further than Robinson, however, by claiming that television (and mass culture more generally) can not offer genuine pleasure either, for pleasure, too, has been commodified and drained of its true significance: "Condemned to pleasure, people often find themselves out on parole, craving to be distracted from distraction by distraction." In van den Haag's view, the commodification of labor under capitalism "depletes people psychologically and makes them weary and restless." And, in their desperate search for genuine experience and involvement, the mass media offer them only vulgar, duplicitous, and vacuous pleasures. The bonds that once existed between producers and consumers, van den Haag continues, have been severed with the advent of the impersonal market system which increases the sense of "violation [that] springs from the same thwarting of individuality that makes prostitution (or promiscuity) psychologically offensive." Not surprisingly, van den Haag's characterization of the "promiscuous" marketplace lends itself to a description of the relationship between producers and consumers of mass culture more generally: "The cost of cheap and easy availability, of mass production, is wide appeal; and the cost of wide-appeal is de-individualization of the relationship between those who cater and those who are catered to; and of the relationship between both to the object of transaction. By using each other indiscriminately . . . the prostitute and her client sacrifice to seemingly more urgent demands the self which, in order to grow, needs continuity, discrimination and completeness in relationships." The "cheap and easy" pleasures which lead van den Haag to personify mass culture as a prostitute also serve him to identify the values of genuine art. Like love, he argues, "art can only be experienced as a cumulative relationship." That is to say, in contrast to the promiscuity and noninvolvement of mass cultural reception, the reception of art encourages a continuous and individualized devotion to the work itself. "New, doubtful, and difficult" in its appreciation, art therefore negates mass culture's "loud, broad, and easy charms."[34] While van den Haag does acknowledge that mass culture may provide pleasure

to some, he maintains that this pleasure is only a "substitute" for the true pleasures of art which restore man's need for unity and "penetrate deeper experience and lead to a fuller confrontation of man's predicament."[35]

"Man's" predicament and "man's" need for unity are recurring themes in much mass culture criticism. And given the pervasive expression of these themes, it is hardly surprising that the televisual form most condemned in mass culture criticism is the soap opera, that form which makes its appeal explicitly to women. In his essay, "Soap Time: Thoughts on a Commodity Art Form," Dennis Porter argues that soap time is "for and of pleasure, the time of consumption, of a collectivized and commercially induced American Dream." In Porter's view, the consumption of soap operas is thoroughly mystified and illusory, for soap operas completely efface the traces of their production and thus deny the distance that would "subvert [their] commercial function." Porter continues: "Not only is [the soap opera] itself made to be sold for a profit on the open market, it is also designed as a purveyor of commodities, an indiscriminate huckster for freeze-dried coffee, pet food, and Carefree panty shields. As a consequence, it mystifies everything it touches. . . ." Although Porter does not state it directly, it is clear from his argument that the soap opera primarily mystifies its audience—an audience implicitly coded as female. (Indeed, the presumed consumers for panty shields and, perhaps, for coffee and pet food are women; hence, women are those consumers who are, according to Porter, most easily duped by the phony spell of the commodity.) Porter does express his moral disgust with the function of soap operas in perpetuating the domestication of American women. And yet, he nevertheless condemns women's pleasure in watching soap operas, and goes so far as to suggest that "the speech of the soap opera . . . is voiceless."[36] In so doing, Porter assumes his experience of watching soap operas to be the same for women, thus silencing the voice that may speak to women in even the most highly privatized and commodified of forms.

A similar inability to acknowledge the function of television for different kinds of audiences marks Noël Burch's discussion of television in his essay, "Narrative/Diegesis—Thresholds, Limits." Like Porter, Burch is also concerned to emphasize how television's commodification of pleasure makes it the newest and most "potent weapon in the media arsenal of capitalism." And yet, unlike Porter, Burch adopts a postmodern stance which does not allow for the hope of distanciation to guard against television's hypnotic, consuming, and narcotizing effects. In striking contrast to his earlier, modernist stance, Burch argues that television's return to the dispersed structures of identification that marked the primitive cinema is "anything but innocent." "For years," Burch continues, "we have assumed that the alienation effect was necessarily enlightening, liberating, that anything which undercut the empathetic power of the diegetic process was progressive." Now, "having observed the way in which Americans relate to a television," however, Burch is forced to conclude, like Jameson, that "distanciation . . . has been coopted." The incorporation of a variety of genres in American network television, while apparently innovative or modernist in its mixture of

styles, is thus for Burch "designed to place everything on the same plane of triviality . . . in which the repression in El Salvador is no more nor less involving than 'The Price is Right.'" The television spectator is not encouraged to think, to know, to take action, but instead to become entranced by a "fascinated non-involvement which is several removes in passivity away from the 'spell of motion pictures.'" Explicitly set in opposition to the cinema, television for Burch becomes the "bad object" from which to promote radical practice. And given television's alleged modernism, now Burch, too, argues for a return to realism, to a strong diegetic effect characteristic of classical narrative forms which will restore spectatorial unity and "elicit some kind of emotional, intellectual, and perhaps even ideological commitment."[37] With Burch, as with Jameson, mass culture criticism comes full circle: from an attack on unity or realism, to a privileging of negativity or modernism, to a call for involvement through realist forms.

In this circular movement, however, the "place" accorded to the feminine remains constant, forever made to bear the composite marks of passivity, mystification, and vulgarity. To quote from Cixous, it seems as though everything "must return to the masculine," to the realm of the "proper" which sustains itself only by locating a place for the feminine outside the realm of respectability, outside the sphere of activity and knowledge.[38]

And yet, if the eternal return of the masculine may pervade our theories of mass culture, it would be both a mistake and a serious omission on my part to suggest that all contemporary writings on mass culture are caught within the terms of a repetitive, masculinized discourse. A brief look at recent film and television scholarship will serve to emphasize that a certain shift is underway in contemporary writings on mass culture, a shift which contests the traditional view of mass culture as essentially passive, or, when used as a term of opprobrium, "feminized" in its modes of consumption and address.

For a start, what contemporary theorists have diagnosed as our "postmodern condition" — a condition marked by an apparent erosion of older distinctions between high and low culture — has been implicitly questioned by theorists who demonstrate that mass culture, from the nineteenth-century novel to the TV serial, has always quoted from high art or "legitimate" forms. Rather than situate either film or television as the privileged metaphor for the (often deplored) proliferation, overproduction, or diffusion of signs, some recent theorists of mass culture have attempted to analyze the function of intertextuality historically and in relation to competing representational forms. Jane Feuer's work on the Hollywood musical, for example, traces the quotation and erasure of high art intertexts as central to the development of the musical as a genre.[39] The elision of boundaries between popular and elite forms, Feuer emphasizes, is by no means an invention of the last several decades nor the mark of our postmodern, despairing condition. Instead, Feuer argues that the Hollywood musical's process of intertextual appropriation (or "quotation") from both legitimate and popular forms (i.e., theater, popular recordings, television) marks that genre as a hybrid from its very inception. Furthermore, as Feuer emphasizes, the self-consciously hybrid character

of the Hollywood musical is itself a form of self-promotion, an attempt at product differentiation in an intensely competitive entertainment market. And, as Feuer concludes, a narrowly formal evaluation of the Hollywood musical's textual effects will not suffice to explain its complex social function. As she puts it, "unless we put the Hollywood musical in its proper place in the history of entertainment, we may mistake it for a modernist film, or, worse, we may never see what its revelations are trying to conceal."[40] Feuer's work on the Hollywood musical, along with other theorists' work on popular forms, also casts doubt upon the pervasive view of mass culture as either formally or ideologicaly homogeneous. Recent scholarship on the woman's film and the maternal melodrama, for example, has insisted upon a differentiated view of the so-called classical Hollywood cinema so as to understand its historically variable structures of address and modes of reception.[41]

What is true of recent film scholarship is also true of recent writing on television. Tania Modleski's work on daytime soaps, for example, examines the assumption that they are "feminized" forms by analyzing the construction of women as social readers and the construction of soap operas as social texts.[42] Proceeding from the assumption that soap operas are organized differently from popular forms aimed at a masculine visual pleasure, Modleski maintains that the discontinuous, often fragmented rhythm of soaps is organized around the rhythm of women's work. Although she quotes approvingly from Benjamin, who claims that reception in a state of distraction marks the experience of mass cultural consumption, Modleski does not then glibly endorse a reading of daytime soaps as simply "progressive," but stresses instead their function in habituating women to "interruption, distraction, and spasmodic toil."[43] At the same time, however, Modleski's negative appraisal of the effects of daytime soaps does not lead her to argue that they are irredeemably "reactionary." On the contrary, she maintains that soap operas serve as the site for the expression of repressed desires which, if openly articulated, "would challenge the psychological and social order of things."[44] The contradictory social function of daytime soaps brings Modleski, finally, to question the patriarchal bias in theories of spectatorship and identi- fication. Indeed, Modleski argues that while the female viewer of soaps may lack the "distance" supposedly required for mastery over the image, she does not pathologically over-identify with soap opera characters, "but rather relates to them as intimates, as extensions of her world."[45] And, as Modleski concludes, we must not condemn this empathetic mode of identification if we are ever to understand how mass culture "speaks to women's pleasure at the same time it puts it in the service of patriarchy, keeps it working for the good of the family."[46]

Following from Modleski's remarks, we may now want to pursue a different reading of mass culture, one which begins from the assumption that mass culture is neither intrinsically "progressive" nor "reactionary," but highly contradictory and historically variable in its form, its meanings, and its effects. It is here that early German film theory, when combined with a feminist perspective, may provide a more precisely social and historical explanation for the construction

of subjectivity and identification in film and television viewing as at once dispersed and distracted while at the same time intensely preoccupied and absorbed. In other words, rather than revert to uncomplicated or merely formal oppositions in our analyses of textual and subject effects, we must attend to the complex interplay between psychic, social, and cultural processes in the construction of visual pleasure and identification. From this perspective, if female spectators find it difficult to assume a fetishistic distance from the image (as feminist theorists and theorists like Kracauer have claimed), then it would no longer follow that they therefore lack the ability to attain pleasure or a critical understanding of the image. Indeed, rather than subscribe to an epistemology that privileges the masculine, to the notion that an emotional identification is always regressive, we would do better to understand that different spectators may recognize themselves differently, and that this recognition, itself an effect of cultural and institutional processes, may entail a complex response of concentration, distraction, and emotional identification. While in some instances an empathetic mode of identification may very well put women's pleasures in the service of patriarchy, in others it may in fact encourage an understanding that leads to strong emotional response which, in turn, may lead to recognition and to action.

Theorists of film and television must begin to acknowledge the complex and competing modes of perception and identification in mass cultural practices and avoid theorizing in an immanently textual or formal manner. As we have seen, not only is such an approach fundamentally ahistorical, but it also lends itself to a pernicious patriarchal bias that elides the social function of representation by continually returning to an epistemology that privileges the masculine and, by extension, "legitimate" cultural forms. This is not to suggest, however, that we embrace mass culture uncritically or assume it to be inherently liberating, progressive, or somehow problem-free. Neither do I mean to deny the real perceptual and historical differences between film and television viewing or to dismiss the important institutional changes resulting from differences between, for example, collective and privatized reception. I would only insist that these differences be theorized historically and not through recourse to essences which reduce the question of difference to a mere application of gendered metaphors and man-made oppositions.[47]

Notes

1. Leslie A. Fiedler, "The Middle Against Both Ends," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York: The Free Press, 1957), 547.
2. For an elaboration of this argument, see Rick Altman, "The Sound Track in Television," paper read at the 1984 SCS Conference, 28-31 March 1984, Madison, Wisconsin; forthcoming in a collection of essays on mass culture edited by Tania Modleski.
3. See, for example, the collection of essays edited by E. Ann Kaplan entitled, *Regarding Television*, The American Film Institute Monograph Series, Vol. 3 (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1984), and especially Kaplan's introductory essay.

4. Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation," trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 44.
5. Tania Modleski, "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory," forthcoming in *Theories of Contemporary Culture*, Indiana University Press, vol. 7. Modleski's feminist critique of mass culture criticism has inspired my own thinking about film and television criticism. For a more elaborate discussion of the "feminization of culture" in mass culture criticism, see Modleski's essay, "Feminity as Mas(s)querade: A Feminist Approach to Mass Culture," forthcoming in *High Theory/Low Culture*, ed. Colin MacCabe, University of Manchester Press.
6. I am referring here to Beverle Houston's analysis of television spectatorship in her essay, "Viewing Television: The Metapsychology of Endless Consumption," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 3 (Summer 1984): 183-95.
7. Miriam Hansen and Thomas Elsaesser have both provided extremely subtle and sophisticated reassessments of early German film theory. They are also in the process of editing a volume of *New German Critique* devoted to a reexamination of early German film theory in light of contemporary theoretical concerns in film and television study.
8. Donald Young, "Social Standards and the Motion Picture," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 128 (November 1926): 147; quoted in Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Random House, 1975), 123.
9. Henry James Foreman, *Our Movie-Made Children* (1933), 64-65; quoted in Sklar, 137.
10. I am merely summarizing part of Hansen's argument here. For a more complete, and extremely illuminating discussion of German mass culture debates, see Hansen's essay, "Early Silent Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?," *New German Critique,* no. 29 (Spring-Summer 1983): 147-83.
11. Hansen, 175.
12. Alfred Döblin, "Das Theater der kleinen Leute," in *Kino-Debatte: Literatur und Film, 1909-1929*, ed. Anton Kaes (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1978), 38; quoted in and translated by Hansen, 174.
13. Franz Pfemfert, quoted in Anton Kaes's introduction to the anthology *Kino-Debatte*, 10; translation mine. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
14. Herbert Jhering, "UFA und Buster Keaton," (1926); quoted in Anton Kaes's introduction to the anthology, *Kino-Debatte*, 15.
15. Heide Schlüpmann's essay, which links intellectual attitudes towards the cinema (especially those of Kracauer, Benjamin, and Adorno) with a pervasive patriarchal bias, has been central to my own thinking about theories of cinematic and televisual spectatorship. See her "Kinosucht," *Frauen und Film*, no. 33 (October 1982): 45-52.
16. Siegfried Kracauer, "Das Ornament der Masse," in *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), 50-51. This essay is available in translation in *New German Critique*, no. 5 (Spring 1975): 67-76.
17. Kracauer, "Kult der Zerstreuung," in ibid., 315.
18. Kracauer, "Das Ornament der Masse," in ibid., 62.
19. Kracauer, "Die kleinen Ladenmädchen gehen ins Kino," in ibid., 292-93.
20. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that either Kracauer, Benjamin, or Brecht settled upon a simple, or one-sided interpretation of perception and distraction in the cinema. While the emphasis in their writings seems to me to fall upon an active or intellectual meaning of distraction which, in turn, is combined with a suspicion towards emotional response and identification, all three theorists were alert to the need for identification, recognition, and pleasure in the cinema. (Indeed, as Heide Schlüpmann has recently argued, Kracauer's own fascination for the cinema was in fact often projected on to the little shopgirls he discusses.)

21. Jean-Louis Comolli and Paul Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," reprinted in translation in *Screen* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 27-36; also reprinted in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 23-30.
22. Comolli and Narboni, *Movies and Methods*, 26.
23. Stephen Heath, "Narrative Space," *Screen* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1976); reprinted in *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 52.
24. Stephen Heath, "From Brecht to Film—Theses, Problems," *Screen* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1975-76): 39.
25. See the anthology of essays, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983).
26. Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: New Left Books, 1977), 209.
27. Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion," 211. It should be noted that Jameson's conclusion here is much in line with the conclusion reached by Kracauer and Benjamin.
28. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, 112.
29. Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments For the Elimination of Television* (New York: William Morrow, 1978), 350-51. As a number of feminist theorists have pointed out, the metaphorics of penetration and rape pervade a number of critical and representational discourses. See, for example, Tania Modleski's remarks regarding Baudrillard's theory of mass communication and Cronenberg's horror films in her essay, "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory." See also Teresa de Lauretis's critique of the patriarchal bias in Derrida and Foucault in her essay, "Between the Rhetoric of Violence and the Violence of Rhetoric," forthcoming in a special issue of *Semiotica* (1984), edited by Nancy Armstrong.
30. The number of sociological and psychological studies of television's effects on children are too numerous to list. For a useful overview of these approaches, as well as an extensive bibliography, see Paul M. Hirsch, "The Role of Television and Popular Culture in Contemporary Society," in *Television: The Critical View*, Third Edition, ed. Horace Newcomb (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 280-310.
31. Hilde T. Himmelweit, *Television and the Child*, 220; quoted in Robert S. Alley, "Television Drama," in *Television: The Critical View*, 91.
32. Worthington Miner, "The Terrible Toll of Taboos" (March 1961); reprinted in *Television and Radio*, ed. Poyntz Tyler, *The Reference Shelf*, Vol. 33, no. 6 (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1961), 171.
33. Paul Robinson, "TV Can't Educate," *The New Republic* (12 August 1978); reprinted in *The Little, Brown Reader*, Third Edition, ed. Marcia Stubbs and Sylvan Barnett (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1983), 216-19.
34. Ernest van den Haag, "Of Happiness and Of Despair We Have No Measure," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, 505, 512, 513, 516.
35. Ibid., 533. Van den Haag also writes, and no less revealingly, that while "no pin-up girl can surfeit appetite for a real one . . . the pin-up can spoil the appetites for other images of girls . . ." (525).
36. Dennis Porter, "Soap Times: Thoughts on a Commodity Art Form," in *Television: The Critical View*, 129-31.
37. Noël Burch, "Narrative/Diegesis—Thresholds, Limits," *Screen* 23, no. 2 (July-August 1982): 16-33.
38. Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation," 41-55.
39. Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
40. Ibid., 47.
41. See Linda Williams, "Something Else Besides a Mother: *Stella Dallas* and the Ma-

ternal Melodrama," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 1 (Fall 1984), 2-27; and Tania Modleski, "Time and Desire in the Woman's Film," *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1984), 19-30.

42. Tania Modleski, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," in *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Methuen, 1984), 85-109. Part of this chapter has been reprinted as "The Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work," in *Regarding Television*, ed. Kaplan, 67-75.

43. Modleski, "The Rhythms of Reception," 71.

44. Modleski, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," 30.

45. Modleski, "The Rhythms of Reception," 69.

46. Ibid.

47. I would like to thank Carol Flinn for her critical and close reading of this essay.