Brief – Online Journal of Snippets

Issue 1 (June 2011), British and American Culture

Contents

Muslim women's online discussions

Anna Piela.....2

Difficulties in analyzing the works of Roger Corman

Paweł Aleksandrowicz.....4

Hag horror and a distorted vision of femininity

Tomasz Fisiak.....6

Sex role strain and the negative psychological effects of the arbitrary ideal of femininity promulgated in the 19th century Britain

Aleksandra Kosińska.....8

Dorothy McKenzie's critique of American popular literature in "The time the lady writer imagined me"

Tadeusz Lewandowski.....10

ISSN 2083-7992

Muslim women's online discussions

Anna Piela

My research explores online discussions of English-speaking Muslim women living mainly in the US and the UK, investigating in particular their debates on different models of gender relations within Islam. The considerable interest in Islam in mainstream media over the past decade has been followed by research on Islamic expressions online. However, the literature has sparingly addressed the gender factor in the Islam-related material available on the Internet. Western media representations of Muslim women's lives, often shaped by non-Muslims' perceptions of hijab, gender subjugation and terrorism, are also reflected in the Internet information on Muslim women. My project, in contrast, presents Muslim women's online voices and concentrates on their views on a range of relevant issues. It is underpinned by feminist perspectives which privilege participants' voices and necessitate a scrutiny of the researcher's own positionality. The data generation method, non-participant observation, helped to minimise the researcher's interference with participants' accounts. The theme of gender relations in Islam, which runs through the chapters, has emerged from interpretations of Islamic sources produced by the participants in the course of online discussions. Whereas the women's views and interpretations constituted a continuum between egalitarian and traditionalist—categories identified by the literature as isolationist—the lived reality was that advocates of different views had no difficulty communicating with each other online and were willing to engage with all voices in the discussions. In addition, a new hermeneutic position, holism, has been identified. It includes those women who seek reconciliation between egalitarian and traditionalist approaches and promote an Islamic sisterhood. Although the participants did not always agree, they collectively supported their God-given right to study and interpret Islamic texts and live by their own understandings.

In terms of substantive themes I addressed several issues discussed by the participants, in particular marriage, sexuality, ethncity, education,

employment, sisterhood, co-existence with non-Muslims, and the diversity of cultures within Islam. In particular, I examined the ways in which the participants created tailored interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith that provided answers to day-to-day problems posted by other group members. I found that digital media had the potential to facilitate a change in power dynamics between genders and cultures in a religious context. The contribution to knowledge was based on the juxtaposition of three elements not commonly associated with each other: gender empowerment, new media, and religion. Furthermore, my research has allowed the identification of unusual alliances across different political and religious differences (feminists/non-feminists, progressive/conservative Muslim) facilitated by technology. Not only was the Internet an indispensable methodological tool in my research but it provided a unique theoretical and practical framework for my work as well. Finally, I concluded that these women are no longer bearers of the meaning in the 'Woman's Status in Islam' discourse, but its makers, which reflects a considerable shift in gender power relations they are involved in.

The main publication following my PhD is a monograph titled *Muslim Women Online: Faith and Identity in the Virtual Space*. It will be published in October 2011 by Routledge who view it as an innovative addition to their series Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies.

Difficulties in analyzing the works of Roger Corman

Paweł Aleksandrowicz

Uniwersytet im. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej
Lublin, Poland

Roger Corman is popularly known as „the king of the B's" for he made a name for himself producing B movies—films with relatively small budgets and often shot in short periods of time. And indeed it would be difficult to come up with any other title to label a filmmaker who directed over 50 films and produced another 200. First and foremost, an aspiring Corman expert would have to watch all of his oeuvres, the sheer multitude of which can be an obstacle difficult to overcome. Second, he or she would have to find some element common to all of these films which belong to different genres and are often period-specific.

Known as "the king of the B's", Corman could also be labeled "the king of the genres" for almost none of the genres was foreign to him. He produced comedies, dramas, westerns, horrors, thrillers as well as action, science fiction, gangster, fantasy and even erotic films. He also addressed different audiences in his movies: teenage, adult, male, female or black.

Another difficulty in analyzing Corman stems from the fact that many of his films are period-specific and should be studied in a larger context. Being a brilliant observer and knowing his audience well, Corman shot numerous culturally marked movies. In 1950s, during the peak of the Cold War, he directed films about nuclear apocalypse and adverse effects of radiation. After the famous Texas tower shooting of 1966, he produced a thriller *Targets* (1968) based on these tragic events. During the hippie revolution at the turn of 1960s and 1970s, he shot a film depicting a society run solely by 20-year-olds and a drama about LSD abuse. Corman was also a skilled copier, adopting themes from popular movies and incorporating them in his own films in an attempt to bask in their success. The release of *The Wasp Woman* (1959) after *The Fly* (1958) and *Piranha* (1978) after *Jaws* (1975) are

just a few examples of such practice.

One more problem an aspiring Corman expert could tackle is the artistic influence Corman had on the filmmakers he helped to promote: Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Joe Dante, James Cameron or Dennis Hopper, to name just a few. Corman's film *The Wild Angels* (1966), for instance, sparked the famous *Easy Rider* (1969) starring Peter Fonda, Denis Hopper and Jack Nicholson, all of whom were Corman's "disciples" (Biskind 42).

Finally, the last obstacle in analyzing Corman (or any other B movie director, for that matter) is the relative scarcity of scholarly literature on B cinema. Therefore, anyone trying to cope with the problems mentioned above would be pretty much on their own.

All in all, Roger Corman, with the multitude and diversity of his works produced over a 55-year period, is probably one of the most remarkable filmmakers to study but at the same time the most difficult to analyze comprehensively. One could go as far as to claim that analyzing Corman is like analyzing the last 50 years of the history of cinema.

Works cited

Biskind, Peter. *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999.

Brief – Online Journal of Snippets 1 (June 2011), British and American Culture

Hag horror and a distorted vision of femininity

Tomasz Fisiak

University of Łódź
Łódź, Poland

The beginning of the 1960s marks the emergence of a volatile, yet intriguing genre in modern cinematography, namely Grande Dame Guignol Cinema, named also hag horror, psycho-biddy or hagsploitation movement. Depite its relatively brief existence, the movies produced in this vein constitute an interesting comment on the then sprouting second-wave feminism, mostly thanks to their very specific portrayal of female characters.

What Ever Happened to Baby Jane (1962), directed by Robert Aldrich, is officially deemed the first hag horror made. The instant success of the movie started a whole series of follow ups, similar in content, approach, even in the syntax of the titles: *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (1964), *Die! Die! My Darling!* (1965), *What's the Matter with Helen?* (1971), *Who Slew Auntie Roo?* (1972), *Dear Dead Delilah* (1972). The genre thrived in America, but it also gained popularity on the British market.

Hag horrors typically portray their heroines simultaneously as Grande Dames and abject witches. The hags, once influential and admired, now live in oblivion at the outskirts of the society. Ironically, they retain their power as they live very independent lives. Psycho-biddies usually confront two characters that withstand exclusion and reification, be it two sisters, a mother and a daughter, a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law or two friends. Yet, in all of these relations women remain in a complex network of interdependencies. In *Baby Jane*, Aldrich juxtaposed two Hollywood icons, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, to create a successful concoction of intense emotional pain and perverse scopophilic pleasure (to use Laura Mulvey's term). Both actresses undergo a scrutinising gaze of the audience, even though they no longer attract the viewers with their good looks. Later on such a psychological study of two women (typically played by former Hollywood icons), adorned with horror elements (Gothic setting, crime,

brief moments of gore and violence), would become a convention followed by other directors (after Derry 33).

What makes the aspect of womanhood in the hag horror particularly interesting is its situatedness within the socio-historical context. With the coming of the 1960s, the second wave of feminist movement started to gain recognition, thus a movie genre presenting powerful women could serve as a perfect vessel to propagate such ideas. Nevertheless, the image of femininity offered here leaves much to desire. The image of women as 'others' (in Simone de Beauvoir's meaning) almost reaches a point of travesty. The characters are either Women in Peril or mentally imbalanced. Peter Shelley clarifies:

> The grande dame as unstable antagonist may pine for a lost youth and glory, or she may be trapped by idealised memories of childhood, with a trauma that haunts her past. She is akin to Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens's novel *Great Expectations*, her adult life wasted as she rots away in her unused wedding dress in her room. Like a ghost, the grande dame cannot rest until the unbalance of the universe is corrected. A refusal to accept reality and the natural process of life exemplifies the fear of aging and death, and implicitly a fear of women (8).

What deteriorates the position of the Grande Dames inhabiting hag horror is the use of their own bodies against them. Bodies of the hags are presented as unclean and abject, bodies that lost their integrity and form (Kristeva qtd. in Creed 11). All these factors deconstruct the traditional viewing of femininity.

Works cited

Chaudhuri, Shohini. *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed*. New York/London: Routledge, 2006.

Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1993.

Derry, Charles. *Dark Dreams 2.0: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film from the 1950s to the 21st Century*. McFarland and Company, 2009.

Shelley, Peter. *Grande Dame Guignol Cinema: A History of Hag Horror from "Baby Jane" to "Mother."* McFarland and Company, 2009.

Brief – Online Journal of Snippets 1 (June 2011), British and American Culture

Sex role strain and the negative psychological effects of the arbitrary ideal of femininity promulgated in the 19th century Britain

Aleksandra Kosińska

Institute of English Studies, Warsaw University
Warsaw, Poland

At the heart of Victorian gender politics there lay a popular assumption that women constituted an essentialised group whose nature was characterized by passivity, self-abnegation, sensitivity, docility and high moral standards. Propelled by the needs of a patriarchal society there circulated a myth of True Womanhood (Welter 151) which promoted in females such qualities as submissiveness, chastity, ignorance, piety and self-sacrifice.

In order to match the Angel in the House ideal women had to follow a restrictive code of conduct. A vicious circle of intricate, often self-contradictory, requirements was created, which, if not met, deprived women of their "femininity" and rendered them monstrous in society's eyes. Alternatives were scarce, since the same model was ubiquitously reinforced; sanctioned both by male-dominated religion, law, literature, as well as by the majority of women who had internalized it, and custom in general.

This situation is synonymous with the condition under which a phenomenon called sex role strain occurs. According to the research conducted by Linda Garnets and Joseph H. Pleck in the 20th century, sex role strain is a set of negative psychological and emotional reactions caused by a "discrepancy between the real self and that part of the ideal self-concept that is culturally associated with gender" (278) and thus considered a marker of femininity/masculinity. What Garnets and Pleck's study proves as far as the 19th century is concerned is that the situation of Victorian women was not a healthy one. Assuming numerous women's real self concept and inclinations were more androgynous, self-aware or exacting than the insistently

promoted Angel in the House, they must have experienced high sex role strain and developed what sociological studies call "inadequate sex role identity" (Garnets and Pleck 279 table 1). They may have perceived their "traits, attitudes, and interests . . .[as] not congruent with . . . [their] biological sex" (Garnets and Pleck 271) which resulted in low self-esteem, the devaluation of self (274), feelings of guilt, inadequateness and maladjustment. Even though there appears to be no comprehensive research available that would study and distinguish specific negative effects of sex role strain, accounts of such Victorian women as Florence Nightingale, Harriet Martineau, Dinah Mulock or Queen Victoria herself, as well as psychologically complex female speakers of 19th century poetesses like Augusta Webster or Amy Levy may all testify to their existence. It is not wholly irrational to presume that madness, neurosis or general frailty of health both physical and mental which the Victorian era associated mainly with women, could be in a certain degree connected to shame, frustration, identity fragmentation or personality crisis induced by sex role strain.

Works cited

Garnets, Linda and Joseph H. Pleck. "Sex Role Identity, Androgyny, and Sex Role Transcendence: a Sex Role Strain Analysis". *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. Vol. 3(3) Spring 1979: 270-283

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860". *American Quarterly*. Vol. 18, No. 2, Part 1. Summer, 1966: 151-174

Dorothy McKenzie's critique of American popular literature in "The Time the Lady Writer Imagined Me"

Tadeusz Lewandowski

Opole University
Opole, Poland

In 1946 the little-known fiction writer Dorothy C. McKenzie offered an equally little-known but noteworthy critique of the state of American popular literature in "The Time the Lady Writer Imagined Me." The article appeared in Dwight Macdonald's *Politics*, expressing chagrin over the standardization of contemporary fiction and squelching of individual voices in commercial publishing. McKenzie's sentiments fit in well with the emerging mass culture critique of the 1940s, which valued modernist literary expression, and articulated deep-seated fears over the power of popular entertainments to bludgeon an increasingly 'massified' public (Gorman 174-75). As this critique was spearheaded by male intellectuals such as Macdonald, Clement Greenberg and the members of the Frankfurt School, McKenzie's voice presents a unique contribution in presciently forecasting feminist concerns of the 1960s.

"The Time the Lady Writer Imagined Me" focuses on the author's personal experiences writing for "slick" periodicals targeted at a middle-class audience of housewives, such as *The Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* (242). McKenzie explicates how these big magazines "publish a product whose manufacture is governed by a rigid set of specifications as must apply to the making of automobiles and airplanes…no disruptive flurry of artistic frenzy can be allowed to enter in" (242). Her critique then expands to America's entire "streamlined civilization," in which writing is packaged to the same degree as meat and pastries (242). More often than not, McKenzie states, editors choose authors whose work they can trust will be "pre-fabricated and mechanically perfect" (243). One's only hope for "success" is "a mind which will allow its ideas to be imposed from outside" (243). The result of this "ordering stories by stock

and number" is the sinister fact that America's "all-pervasive popular fiction bore little resemblance to life, but dined constantly at the [female] readers of our nation" (243). In a question that anticipates the stirrings of the feminist movement, McKenzie inquires: "Would they not eventually reap neuroses from their frustrated attempts to make their lives more nearly resemble the story pattern?" (243). Ultimately, her central fear was that such fiction would "so affect the national culture that in time life would begin to imitate the fiction formula" (243).

This prophetic vision of a female citizenry led by the unreality of popular literature toward a life of bland replication was to a considerable degree borne out in the 1950s with the arrival of the 'new domesticity.' McKenzie's reference to American women's "frustrated attempts" to conform to the role of housewife as presented in popular culture and the consequent "neuroses" appear to inform Betty Friedan's path breaking social analysis *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which inaugurated the feminist movement (Boyer et al. 860). Likewise, the nascent critique of popular culture to which McKenzie's article contributed became pervasive in the 1950s and early 1960s, though scholars soon began to question the theory of mass society that underpinned its analysis (Gorman 186). "The Time the Lady Writer Imagined Me," therefore, constitutes a worthy if obscure side note to the history of both cultural and women's studies.

Works cited

Boyer, Paul, et al. *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People, from . . . 1865*. Fourth edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.

Gorman, Paul R. *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

McKenzie, Dorothy. "The Time the Lady Writer Imagined Me." *Politics* 3. August 1946.