

Essays in Philosophy

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Feminine Politics in Popular Culture: The
Construction of Gender*

Article 1

1-2003

Introduction

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Nancy (2003) "Introduction," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Essays in Philosophy is a biannual journal published by Pacific University Library | ISSN 1526-0569 | <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip/>

Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 4 No. 1, January 2003

Introduction

Slasher films, mainstream movies and Barbie dolls, what do they all have in common? They are small but persuasive elements of our popular culture. Aspects of public discourse that shape and influence our self understanding, particularly how we understand ourselves in terms of gender relations. This issue of *Essays in Philosophy* explores how those elements may influence the construction of gender.

We live in a world increasingly defined by image, so we cannot underestimate the affects that popular culture has on identity. That is, public discourse, including popular culture, shapes our understanding of what it means to be a man or woman in this society and to negate the impact these public messages have on our private identity is the turn a blind eye on a vital and pervasive force. I hope this issue will shed some light on the dynamic relationship between popular culture and the representation of women as well as offer the reader some insight into what it may mean for women to exist in our society today.

The following three essays unravel the complex messages inherent to popular representations of women. The first two essays offer a psychoanalytic examination of sexualized murder (e.g. representations of women as mutilated corpses) and the female gaze in the mainstream movie, *The Piano*. Delving into the subconscious realm may offer an in-depth analysis into the notion of femininity and the psychological struggles between men and women in a paternal/symbolic order. In other words, the first two essays explore the psychoanalytic features of what may seem at first blush mere shock theatre or avant-garde artistic expression. The third essay solicits a new perspective about an old icon---Barbie. Although the favorite whipping toy of contemporary feminists, I invite you to lend a sympathetic read to our final essay for we may still have something to learn from Barbie after all.

Examining the representations of women as the victims of sexualized murder, Katherine Cooklin's "Lustmord in Weimar Germany: The Abject Boundaries of Feminine Bodies and Representations of Sexualized Murder", considers the psychoanalytic implications of this particular cultural expression as it appeared in the artistic works of Otto Dix and George Grosz. Referring mainly to Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Cooklin argues that both the process of abjection and the rituals of defilement (e.g. negative cultural notions of menstrual blood and the maternal connection between mother-son incest relations) reinforce the exclusion of the abject (femininity) from identity/subjectivity (symbolic order). Because the feminine (the unconscious, semiotic and pre-linguistic stage) threatens the borders of identity and symbolic order, woman must be reviled---rendered as Other. Thus, we may understand *lustmord* as the ultimate ritual of abjection against female sexuality. For instance, referring to Dix's *Sexual Murder* (1922), Cooklin points out how he portrays women in lewd positions (sometimes as corpses) with mutilated genitals or with

their breasts cut off. Cooklin suggests that defiling women in such disturbing and graphic ways may represent the way in which culture deals with the abject; that is, *lustmord* (e.g. slasher films) is one way for women to be rejected on a societal or cultural level. In sum, *lustmord* may function as an artistic expression that symbolizes woman's defilement and her repulsion from the social order.

In an attempt to define female specificity or the female gaze within the phallogentric hegemony of mainstream movie making, our second essay, by Jaime Bihlmeyer, offers a psychoanalytic analysis of Jane Campion's *The Piano*. Referring to the works of such prominent post-structuralists thinkers as Jacques Lacan, Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Alice Jardin as the foundation of the analysis, Bihlmeyer points out how Campion valorizes the maternal semiotic and the female gaze within the context of popular film making. Unlike the univocal Symbolic order of phallogentrism, the female gaze is a pre-lingual expression of the maternal semiotic ---itself prior to any representation or hierarchal differentiation which defines the Symbolic. Like Cooklin, Bihlmeyer examines the ways which the priority of the maternal semiotic threatens to deconstruct the patriarchal Symbolic order. *The Piano* unveils this tension and affords mainstream audiences a glimpse into the female gaze. Despite the prevalence of the male gaze (indeed, it has become institutionalized) in popular film making, Bihlmeyer's detailed examination of *The Piano* (the characters and camera shots) demonstrates the valorization of the female gaze (the pre-lingual stage of the semiotic) in mainstream movies.

The third essay, "The Wonder of Barbie: Popular Culture and the Making of Female Identity", offers an intriguing perspective about the infamous Barbie doll. Lenore Wright recommends a compelling feminist aesthetic that arises from the notion of "play" found in Kenneth Walton's *Mimesis and Make-Believe*. Contrary to many contemporary feminist critics, Wright argues that Barbie can serve as a positive tool in identity formation for little girls. Wright suggests that the greatest challenges to female identity rests in printed and televised advertisements and not in toys like Barbie. Barbie, a self-representational toy, affords children greater agency in identity formation than the closed and deterministic system of printed and televised representations. According to Wright, Barbie reinforces in children that identity remains a dynamic process of self-creation. Printed and televised images, however, ignore this aspect of identity formation. Unlike the open possibilities of Barbie and dolls like her, mass advertising suggests that there is one female identity out there and it is up to women to discover/attain it. Dolls like Barbie offer a "space" to explore and imagine more creative notions of self. If we consider Walton's notion of "play," Wright presents us with an interesting challenge: Can Barbie and dolls like her offer something positive for feminist critiques of popular culture and identity formation?

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