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PAST THE POST IN FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES

Catharine Lumby

Over the past decade, Feminist Media Studies has published a rich array of research ranging across highly theoretical interventions to detailed empirical studies of socio-economic disadvantage affecting women. Reading over this archive, it is clear, however, that a number of buried binarisms continue to frame many debates in feminist media studies. This article considers one in particular: the putative divide between second-wave and “post-feminism.” More broadly, it considers how we might move beyond oppositional frames of reference to enact an ethics of engagement that produces a more nuanced relationship between speaking positions within the field and with the objects of our research.

I was looking forward to taking part in an all-female panel at an Australian writer’s festival, until I discovered the topic we were being asked to address: “Is Feminism Dead?” A brief trawl of my computer files confirmed that I had had been asked to speak on a version of the same topic a total of fourteen times in the past decade. The panel, typically, included a “young feminist” and a Big Name second-waver. I was the filling in the generational sandwich. When the evening arrived the venue was packed with people of all ages. I found myself throwing away my notes and simply asking everyone in the audience who considered themselves to be a feminist to raise their hand. Confronted by a sea of female and male arms, I rested my case and entered a plea: “Take a look around you. Feminism is alive. Now can we please talk about something else?”

Feminist Media Studies has been just one of many key fora in which debates about “post-feminism” and its implications for theory, politics, and culture have played out over the past decade. The debate in this journal has, of course, been more nuanced and productive than the pseudo-generational warfare that has passed for analysis in much of the popular media. As editors Lisa McLaughlin and Cynthia Carter wrote in 2006:

No one whose writing has appeared in these pages has maintained that feminism is passé. No one has proceeded via argumentative assertion rather than analysis in the fashion of post-feminist, self-promoting provocateur Camille Paglia or conjured a simplistic “feminist-as-victimology” thesis in the manner of Katie Rophie. Instead, we have been fortunate to attract scholarship that understands post-feminism as a force that must be recognized—for better and/or for worse. (McLaughlin & Carter 2006, p. 125)

Their introduction referred to a much-cited article by Angela McRobbie published two years earlier. In it, McRobbie argued that post-feminism “positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved,
in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise it is no longer needed” (McRobbie 2004, p. 255). McRobbie’s ostensible target is the field of popular gender debate which, for her, defines the cultural space of post-feminism. At a more implicit level, however, her article places a larger question mark over much of the feminist media studies scholarship that has defined the field for the past two decades. Her essay is an undeniably valuable contribution by a scholar with extensive experience in navigating the shoals where feminist theory meets popular culture. For this reader, however, it equally defines a sticking point in our field—a sticking point that continues to underpin critical and public intellectual debates about feminism and media.

In the following short article, I want to consider what’s at stake in the either/or discourse that, I’ll argue, too often shadows scholarship on both sides of the putative post-feminist divide. While acknowledging, as Lisa McLaughlin and Cynthia Carter do, that scholarly work in our field is rarely so reductive, I will attempt draw out what I see as a buried binary that stalks attempts to move beyond received and unproductive oppositions: between second wave and post-feminism; between activist feminist work and popular feminism; between theoretical feminism and “the real world.” At the risk of falling into the very trap I want to discuss here, I am intentionally trying to address the larger question of where feminist media studies, in all its diversity, has come from and where some of the many remaining challenges may lie.

Meaghan Morris’s work is particularly resonant here given her longstanding insistence, both explicitly and implicitly through her own writing practice, that feminist media and cultural studies scholars need to pay careful attention both to speaking position and to where and how their work rubs up against its objects of study (Morris 1988). Morris’s work offers a double challenge. On one hand, she asks us to critically and rigorously interrogate the terms in which we frame the work of feminism and our claims to “represent” that project. On the other, she warns against descending into the kind of theoretical navel-gazing that amounts to polishing beautiful theories and leaving them to shine on a shelf. In her essay on post-feminism, McRobbie notes that the early 1990s marked a turn to feminist reflexivity in the contemporary humanities steered by the work of post-colonial feminists, Foucauldian analyses of power, and the work of theorists such as Judith Butler who drew attention to embodiment and (inter)subjectivity. These shifts had a deep influence on feminists working in media studies and that influence remains marked in the articles which comprise the first decade of this journal. Reflexivity has been a defining feature of feminist media studies for a long time, which brings me to a central question: when is it productive and when it is self-destructive? Or to put that question in terms I take from Morris’s work: how do scholars in the field work with the both/and in mind?

McRobbie’s article symbolises and enacts this problematic. While acknowledging the complexity of the feminist media studies field and the importance of questioning the “assumed subject of interrogation for feminism, a shift marked by a recognition that feminism may always be talking about a ‘she’ but needs to think beyond the lens of an assumed ‘we’” (McRobbie 2004, p. 256), she equally invokes a “we” in support of an argument that opposes “feminism” to universal others: namely “young women” and the “popular culture” which defines and distorts their values. For example: “Why do young women recoil in horror at the very idea of the feminist” (McRobbie 2004, p. 258)? Was it ever different, I immediately wondered? Where, when, and how and why? At the heart of feminist media studies are a series of longstanding and still critical concerns about what feminism is for and what it ought to be doing in theoretical terms when it confronts the
wider cultural sphere that defines media production and consumption. Regardless of how much Foucault, Butler, or Spivak we’ve all read, it seems to me that many scholars in our field, me included, still have a tendency to default to essentialist terms and oppositions that define their own feminism(s) and their concerns about others: young women, older feminists, insufficiently rigorous scholars. We snap back and forward, it seems, between the particular (the “she”) and the universal (the “we”).

In my first book, *Bad Girls* (Lumby 1997), I attempted to navigate this vexed issue and to think about how scholars in the feminist media studies field might use popular culture not only as an object of study, but equally as a tool for thinking, particularly for thinking through the state of feminist politics. A decade and half later, it seems to me that the same dichotomies that I and others were trying to think through then still arrest the work of our collective field. A classic example of this hiatus is that old chestnut: woman as sexual subject versus woman as sexual object. Reading back over the articles archived in *Feminist Media Studies*, I was struck by how often this opposition continues to frame debate. In her 2003 article, “From sexual objectification to sexual subjectification: the resexualisation of women’s bodies in the media,” Rosalind Gill argues that the “figure of the autonomous, active, desiring subject” that dominates popular cultural representations of young women has turned out to be “objectification in new and even more pernicious guise” (Gill 2003, p. 105). Gill’s argument rests, like McRobbie’s, on a generalised account of both young women and popular culture. What’s missing is a recognition of the particularity, the spatiality and the diversity of modes of media production and consumption—the kind of attention to social context, location, and cultural history that resists using popular culture or its consumers as “evidence” for or against a given feminist position.

As Meaghan Morris (1990) has pointed out, this failure to pay close attention to context, location, and history is not confined to media studies theorists who want to highlight the politically regressive elements in popular culture. It also underpins many attempts to “celebrate” the popular and the populace which in Morris’s words constitutes “a citing of popular voices (the informants), an act of translation and commentary, and then a play of identification between the knowing subject of cultural studies and a collective subject, ‘the people’” (Morris 1990, pp. 22–23). She concludes what is now regarded as a seminal essay with this exhortation:

I think that feminists have to work quite hard in cultural studies not to become subjects of banality in that old double sense: not formulate edicts and proclamations, yet to keep theorizing, not to become supermimics in the Baudrillardian sense of becoming, by reversal, the same as that which is mimicked, yet to refuse to subside either into silence or a posture of reified difference. Through some such effort, pained and disgruntled subjects, who are also joyous and inventive practitioners, can begin to articulate our critique of everyday life. (Morris 1990, p. 41)

There are, of course, many examples of work published in *Feminist Media Studies* over the past decade which resist a collapse into an either/or relationship to the popular, which attempt to grapple with contradiction and ambiguity and which interrogate the relationship of the researcher to the researched. An example, which works in the territory I’ve been discussing, is Feona Attwood’s article, “Pornography and objectification” (2004), in which she explores the consequences of feminist media studies discussions of pornographic texts remaining wedded to an essentialist framework. In her article, Attwood neatly avoids advocating a correct “viewing” position. Importantly, she draws on the work
of diverse and often opposed groups of writers and researchers on the subject to propel the debate forward. Of this aim she writes:

The very different starting points of writers such as Dworkin, Kendrick and Kipnis, and the different ways in which they use the term pornography, should, in theory, be a productive difference which enables a multi-dimensional analysis of sexual texts and their significance, but in practice it has tended to produce a rather difficult area of study where the analysis of pornography and the analysis of the representation of women’s sexuality has become somewhat unclear and entangled. . . . While the work produced by these writers is often rich and detailed, the conclusions which are drawn are rigid and circular. (Attwood 2004, p. 10)

Attwood goes on to consider how these very different frames of reference cash out in relation to a single image: a Yves Saint Laurent perfume ad featuring a naked Sophie Dahl which was described by one tabloid newspaper as “the picture that divided Britain.” Attwood employs a detailed analysis of the popular reception of the image as a lens to think through theoretical feminist and related frameworks for understanding representations of the female body and female sexuality. Her article constructs a möbius strip between theory and its object and it does so without insisting that there is one way to understand this image. Her position is not relativist. Rather, she wants to draw our attention to this image and its location in a particular cultural and particular space and time. She equally wants to know how and why quite different theoretical positions might be simultaneously useful for understanding a moment in popular culture.

I want to turn now to look at the work of feminist media studies practitioners I work with in Australia: women who all happen to be younger than me and whose work inspires me. The subject of listening is one Kate Crawford (2009) is doing rich empirical and theoretical work on in projects that span social and mobile media. In a recent article, she uses the metaphor of listening to analyse forms of online engagement that have been overlooked, while also allowing a deeper consideration of the emerging disciplines of online attention. Her article both analyses and performs the practice of listening. She writes of the received idea that online media gives a newly democratic voice to participants:

This speaking “truth to power” model is a prominent feature of much media and cultural studies analysis, but it has limited the recognition of the variety and reach of the practices of listening online. Listening has not been given sufficient consideration as a significant practice of intimacy, connection, obligation, and participation online; instead, it has often been considered as contributing little value to online communities, if not acting as an active drain on their growth. (Crawford 2009, p. 527)

Crawford bases her larger claims on detailed and empirical ongoing work which involves with young mobile and online media users about mobile media, affect and the technologies of listening. She works at both an abstract and a quotidian level simultaneously: she listens and she speaks. But her theoretical work is not merely predicated on what she hears; it is informed and changed by it.

Kath Albury (Kath Albury, Neena Funnell & Estelle Noonan 2010) has recently co-authored a paper on sexual citizenship that considers what is at stake in debates about young people and “sexting.” She and her co-authors connect earlier debates about the civic representation of women with the growing anxiety that animates debates about how children are represented and what kind of agency we might expect them to have.
The paper draws on feminist and other discussions of representation and agency to ask whether teenagers are becoming “unrepresentable” and what this might mean for their sexual and broader citizenship. It’s a paper that ranges in a detailed and nuanced way across popular and scholarly frames of reference, but does so productively: it does larger work in the feminist media studies field. Importantly, it connects earlier feminist work in political theory on citizenship to emergent debates about children, teenagers, and online and mobile media. It also poses a set of useful questions for public policy—troubling the relationship between the presumed exclusive circles that define academic discourse and the outside world (Albury, Funnell & Noonan 2010). Citing Stuart Hall, Albury and her co-authors highlight on an apposite observation: “Representation can only be properly analysed in relation to the actual concrete forms which meaning assumes, in the concrete practices of the signifying, ‘reading’ and interpretation; and these require analysis of the material forms . . . in which symbolic meaning is circulated” (Stuart Hall 1997, p. 9).

Hall’s observation is not simply one that goes to method. At a deeper level, it describes an ethics of engagement: a caution about the delicate relationship between speaking and listening. Kate Crawford (2009) talks about social media in the context of the “texture of everyday life” and observes that: “Twitter is itself a word that implies the sonic in both its derivations: either as the calling of birds or the ‘idle’ chatter of humans” (Crawford 2009, p. 528). It’s an apt metaphor for me for the pull and tug of the double-jointed position we all occupy as both feminists and media studies researchers. There’s a sense of belonging and equally a sense of needing to learn from the surprising things we hear when we pay attention to the people and texts we research. Feminism has always been about working with double-jointed positions: we need to talk about what we have in common and at the same time we need to listen and respond to an outside. The issues we confront in the field of feminist media studies are central to the broader feminist project. As the past decade of Feminist Media Studies attests, work in our field has ranged across highly theoretical interventions to detailed empirical studies of socio-economic disadvantage faced by women. At its best, feminist media studies connect diverse forms of theory and practice. It reminds us of how and why thinking and writing matters and how scholarly practice can make a difference, as well as reminding us why small differences matter.

REFERENCES


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