



Feminism

To this critic's thinking, at least, no movement in intellectual and cultural history has done more to change literary criticism than feminism. Though the word *feminism*, as a term for supporting women's rights, did not enter the English language until the 1890s, feminism can trace its history back to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and earlier. But feminist literary criticism, in some ways like feminism in general, gathered its force gradually, moving through such landmarks as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Mary Ellmann's less well-known *Thinking about Women* (1968), and Kate Millet's galvanizing *Sexual Politics* (1970) and then finally coalescing in the late 1970s and the 1980s.

For literary criticism, feminism is not a method in the sense that new criticism, structuralism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis are methods. It does not zero in on codifying a set of operations that one might turn like a crank to produce a new epistemology or a new literary criticism, though it produces those things nevertheless. While feminist criticism certainly has method and has changed literary critical method in general, it is not so much a method in itself as an area of interest and even a commitment. In that sense, the shift to feminism marks a change in this book that will continue through queer studies, in some respects through Marxism (which may define itself more by its methods but which also defines itself by its commitment), and through postcolonial studies, race studies, ecocriticism, and disability studies.

WHAT IS FEMINISM?

At its most fundamental level, feminism is a simple concept. It is about taking women seriously and respectfully. It sets out to reverse a pattern and history of not taking women seriously, a pattern so deeply ingrained that it can seem natural, like mere truth. Feminists sometimes call that habit of not taking women seriously, not respecting women, *misogyny*, and *misogyny* is part of the broader cultural history and practice of centering on men while underestimating women, which feminists dub *patriarchy*.

Like queer studies and in some ways postcolonial, race, and disability studies, feminism derives also from an identity category. Thus, the principles that feminists have thought through often overlap with, feed into, and feed off similar issues in other identity-related studies, including African American studies, Latina/o studies, Asian American studies, and American Indian studies, to name only those that have the most visible space in contemporary academia (where their position nevertheless often remains precarious). As feminists think through identity, they draw on and contribute to the debates about essentialism and identity that we have seen in the previous chapters on deconstruction and psychoanalysis. In a spirit that runs partly parallel with deconstruction and that partly intertwines with deconstruction (including feminist deconstruction), we can say that feminism sees women not as one thing but as many different things.

First-, second-, and third-wave feminism. Feminist debates about identity take us to a rough historical outline that loosely tracks feminism through a series of three waves. *First-wave feminism*, beginning with Wollstonecraft's arguments for women's education, focused on establishing women's rights, such as the right to own property and the right to vote, officially recognized in the United Kingdom partly in 1918 and fully in 1928, and in the United States in 1920. *Second-wave feminism* defined itself along a broader cultural agenda, beginning in the 1960s. While in practical politics second-wave feminism often concentrated on achieving equal rights, like first-wave feminism, the theoretical movements most associated with second-wave feminism concentrated more on describing or even celebrating the distinctiveness and specialness of women, sometimes under such rubrics as *cultural feminism*, which claimed a women's culture that was kinder, gentler, and more peaceful than the dominant culture, or *difference feminism*, which was less interested in equal rights than in establishing women's difference and superiority. Second-wave feminism

often focused on a sense of sisterhood and shared identity among all women.

But to some feminists, that sense that all women shared the same identity came to ring false. For that reason, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, many feminists reacted against second-wave feminism so that a **third-wave feminism** developed. Third-wave feminism objected to second-wave feminism as essentialist and sought instead to build a feminism that focused more on the variety of women, making a point of including women of all races and building coalitions across racial and national boundaries. In these ways, third-wave feminism often engaged with the antessentialist impulses of deconstruction.

In practice, most feminist critics and theorists today do not define themselves entirely through this or that wave. They may favor third-wave feminism, but they draw on all three waves to pursue nonessentialist, political, and cultural agendas.

Postfeminism?

To my mind, we live, loosely speaking, in an extended age of third-wave feminism, but some people say that we have reached an age of *postfeminism*. What is postfeminism? It is different things to different people. To antifeminists, the term offers a chance to make people believe that feminism has come and gone. To others, however, the *post*-suggests a dialogue between feminism and poststructuralism, including a reaction against second-wave feminism. But I would suggest that third-wave feminism already expresses that dialogue, while the prefix *post*-threatens to undermine the feminist side of the conversation, relegating feminism to the past. To yet others, including some poststructuralist feminists, the term *postfeminism* suggests an ongoing readiness to reimagine feminism for changing times. To my thinking, the idea that we live in an age of postfeminism is a lamentable form of cultural consumerism. It treats feminism like a consumer product, something to be used up and gotten rid of so that we can go on to use up another product that we will soon get rid of in the same way. It reduces feminism to a fashion of the moment. In that context, it is no surprise to hear people referring not only to postfeminism but also to post-postfeminism. I would rather that we get used to it and accept it: Feminism is here to stay.

While the division of feminism into a series of waves oversimplifies overlapping histories and dialogues, the movement from second- to third-wave feminism roughly parallels the history of feminist literary criticism. Early feminist literary criticism had much to do with second-wave feminism. It revolutionized critical thinking and laid the ground for a dialogue with the poststructuralist Marxist, queer, and historicist thinking that characterizes more recent movements in feminist criticism. The popular feminism that most people encounter in journalism, in the mass media, and in the caricatures from fearful antifeminists continues to rely on second-wave feminism to represent all feminism. Similarly, the ideas that drove early feminist literary criticism continue to dominate what most readers understand about what feminist literary criticism might be.

For that reason, this chapter sets out to acquaint readers with the specific strategies of early feminist criticism so that readers can recognize them as distinct strategies, much as the chapter on new criticism sets out to help readers who took new criticism for granted come to recognize it as a specific set of strategies. In each case, the goal is also to pose alternatives, whether to new criticism or to the approaches of early feminist criticism, thus allowing readers, and perhaps even encouraging them, to critique those approaches. Then readers can decide either to continue the practices of early feminist criticism more knowingly or to engage with more recent and less publicized feminist alternatives.

The later chapters of this book, then, follow contemporary feminist criticism and theory as it helps shape and is shaped by queer studies, Marxism, historicism, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, race studies, and ecocriticism, all central to the dialogues of third-wave feminism. As second-wave feminism sometimes proclaimed the sameness of women, so third-wave feminism, as we have begun to see, takes an interest in the variety of women—and, we might add, the variety of men. Contemporary, third-wave feminism enlarges the dialogue between feminism and the study of gender, seeing women less as a separate group and more as integral to the world across local and global gender formations, geographies, and cultures.

EARLY FEMINIST CRITICISM

Images-of-women criticism. Early feminist literary criticism, as Toril Moi notes, focused on what came to be called **images of women** (after the title of a 1972 anthology of feminist criticism), at first primarily in

male-authored works but eventually also in female-authored works. Images-of-women criticism judges a work (novel, film, music video, song) according to whether it provides “positive images” of women. If it portrays good women, then according to images of women criticism it is a good film, song, or novel. If it does not portray good women, then it is not so good a work. By now, many feminist critics see the focus on “images of women” as limiting and old-fashioned, because it tends to imply that women characters must be good “role models,” which seems to confine literature to a narrow, predictable range of possibilities. For example, it excludes parody and much comedy, such as in feminist writing that makes fun of particular kinds of women or feminist writing that may set out to portray unrealistic characters. In feminist writing, as in most writing, characters can come in all kinds—good, bad, or too unrealistic to be either good or bad.

We have all been in classes or conversations where people say that they do not like this or that movie or book or play because a character is unrealistic, including times when they object to a work because it portrays an unrealistic stereotype, perhaps even a demeaning stereotype. In that sense, we need “images-of-women” criticism, and it has close parallels in criticism that focuses on what we might call (coining some phrases) images of African Americans or images of American Indians or Catholics, immigrants, Muslims, or old people, and so on. In all these areas, images criticism plays a huge role, but to later feminist critics it came to seem that images criticism played far too large a role.

Perhaps it comes down to this: When do the characters work as role models, inviting people to imitate or differ from them? And when do the characters end up, far more, doing any of the many other things that literary characters can do, such as make us laugh or feel sad, dramatize a story, make us think about language or a social issue, probe our psychologies, or astound us with their unpsychological but entertaining difference from actual people? Readers and viewers like such movies, novels, and plays as *Crash*, *The Hours*, *Pride and Prejudice*, or *Gravity* partly for their more or less realistic portrayals but like *Angels in America*, *Atlantique*, *The Fast Runner*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Incredibles*, *Inglourious Basterds*, or *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* partly for their thought-provoking, entertaining, or sometimes scary sliding away from and distorting of realistic portrayals. The movement away from realistic characters that offer role models for the audience does not make these works aesthetically or ethically bad film or bad writing.

Many contemporary movies—far more than older movies—feature skillfully active, adventurous female leads, as in, for example, *The Descent*, *Salt*, or *The Hunger Games*. Such characters might seem to reinforce a feminist desire for women to break past traditional barriers and control their own lives. The energetic, skillful action of such characters reacts against the earlier pattern of weak or passive female characters. The reaction against a continuing expectation that women do not typically act boldly and skillfully can make such characters look like welcome feminist critiques of misogynist assumptions. But it can also make them look like antifeminist, defensive overcompensations that mock the supposed weakness of real women outside of movies.

When we watch secret agent extraordinaire Evelyn Salt outsmart and outfight one man after another in rapid succession, we might see her talents on their own terms, as we probably see the talents of secret agent extraordinaire Jason Bourne in the Bourne movies and novels. But viewers might also see Salt's talents as somehow even less credible than Bourne's, as playing against the cultural gendering of our expectations. Deconstructively, we can take both views, for neither tells the whole story. Similarly, in *The Descent* and its sequel we might admire the Amazon spelunkers' skill and boldness, but when adventure turns to horror and the films send the women to their gruesome fates, we might wonder if the films punish their heroines for crossing boundaries that women supposedly should never cross.

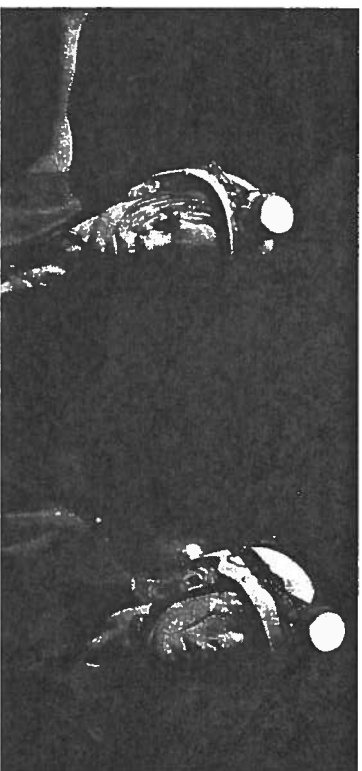


Figure 6.1 “What was that?” Natalie Mendoza and Shauna Macdonald in *The Descent*.

In such ways, a feminist interpretation depends not so much on the characters themselves as on the broader social contexts that shape how we process the characters. In both examples, there is no objective and true images-of-women litmus test that tells us that the characters are good or bad role models. Even if we wanted to model ourselves after them, they are too unrealistic (entertainingly so) for us to suppose we could do what they do. Instead, the maelstrom of interpretive possibilities sets characters spinning in a broader cultural dialogue about the history of how we think about gender, what audiences expect, and what we think audiences should expect.

But there is a test from the heyday of images-of-women criticism that combines an acid sense of feminist humor with a searching feminist critique. Known as the Bechdel test, it gauges the individual characters less than the film itself, or the novel, play, TV show, or any other work with a plot. In her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, Alison Bechdel proposed the following three criteria for judging a film as worth watching: It must have two women. The women must talk to each other. And they must talk to each other about something other than a man. (Bechdel 22-23). We could apply a similar test for other identity groups. Do they get at least two characters? Do the characters talk to each other? Do they talk to each other about themselves and their own interests? Such questions offer a basic gauge of respect, agency, and dignity.

It is remarkable how many works flunk the Bechdel test. And certainly the test has its limits, like other images-of-women criticism. As we have seen, for example, *The Descent* passes the test with flying colors and yet may bait us into expecting a more female-friendly outcome than many viewers might think that we end up with. Works that seem feminist may flunk the test while others that seem misogynist may pass it. Sometimes, breaking the boundaries of respect, agency, and dignity makes for the interest of a plot. But often, energizing the plot by breaking those boundaries seems like an excuse for wallowing in patriarchal disrespect. Whatever its limits, the Bechdel test offers both readers and writers a bracing reminder of how few options they will find in the patriarchal cul-de-sac of much traditional film and literature, and how many other options await us if we give them a chance. With the risk and the advantage of prescribing specific but refreshingly simple standards, the Bechdel test shows that even while we may want to question the limits of images-of-women feminist criticism, we may do well to

keep it as one possible consideration among whatever other critical questions we go on to ask.

Prescriptive realism and the authority of experience. Feminist critics study many topics and issues besides character. A focus on expecting realistic character, as in the Bechdel test, can lead to prescriptive criticism or even prescriptive realism, which tells writers how to write, prescribing how they should write rather than describing how they do write. Prescriptive realists tell writers that they should present realistic characters or characters that offer "positive role models." We can see why early feminist criticism would err in the direction of prescriptive criticism, because there was so urgent a need to point out the powerfully misogynist traditions of cultural history, literary history, and literary criticism. There is no sign that that task will end, but given the success that feminist critics have had in that domain, they have grown more and more interested in doing other things as well.

Prescriptive realism is also sometimes referred to by the title of another early (1977) anthology of feminist criticism, *the authority of experience*. The problem there lies in the assumption that one kind of experience is authoritative, as in the statement "As a woman, I know what sexism means," whereas to many feminists, including poststructuralist feminists, experience varies, and so does the interpretation of any given experience. After all, another person could say "As a woman, I appreciate it when men protect me from having to work, manage money, or vote or save me from bothering my little head with going to college and reading all those difficult books." For poststructuralists, including Lacanians (as we saw in Chapters 4 and 5) and many poststructuralist feminists, experience is never stable. It is always mediated by culture, which leads different people to understand experience in different ways.

As we will see in Chapter 11, on reader response, critics have debated whether, when different people read the same text or interpret the same experience, their different projections onto it mean that they end up seeing different texts and experiences rather than the same texts and experiences. Poststructuralist feminists might argue, therefore, that if we believe in the authority of experience, then we think that we can lock the signified onto one signifier and isolate that signified from other signifiers. But in poststructuralist criticism, both *authority* and *experience* have often become suspect words, especially *authority*. What looks like authority to one person may look

like opinion to another. What one person says is an authoritative perspective on women's experience may look to another person like a misogynist perspective ("I'm so glad that men protect me"). To many feminists, authority seems like the enemy of feminist criticism, not the justification for it.

The word *experience*, however, continues to provoke debate. To many critics it seemed for a while that poststructuralists, including poststructuralist feminists, had put an end to appeals to experience, at least among critics who kept up with the debates in cultural criticism. But in recent years a number of critics have come to the defense of experience, especially critics of color, notably bell hooks, who fear that if we banish experience from critical thinking, then in many people's minds white experience will blot out the experience of people of color. Such critics realize that the concept of experience is open to abuse, because different people have different experiences, so that no one experience is authoritative. But they also point out that all criticism depends on experience, even if different people have different experiences and interpret them in different ways. The point then becomes, not to do away with reasoning from experience, but on the contrary to reason in ways that take into account the multiplicity of experience.

Expanding the canon. Feminist criticism began by studying the often-disturbing images of women in literature written by men and opposing those images to the authority of women's experience, but the concentration on writing by men quickly came to seem as limiting as the idea that women all had the same experience. Feminist critics turned increasingly to women's literary writing, contributing to a massive movement to read beyond the traditional set of literature that critics and teachers typically studied and taught. The traditional set of literature came to be called the **canon**. Feminist critics of all colors and heritages worked to "expand the canon," joining with critics of African American literature and then increasingly of *Latina/o* literature, Asian American literature, American Indian literature, Black British literature (such as works by British writers of Caribbean, South Asian, and African heritage), and literature from around the world, including English-language literature in English departments, and—beyond English departments—literatures in other languages. As part of this project, literary critics have dug into the archives to uncover forgotten works of literature, ranging from works once famous and then forgotten (a common category for women's

writing) to works never published. For several decades now, these recovery efforts have dramatically enlarged the range of literature that critics, teachers, and students read and study.

Beyond celebration. In this context, feminist critics not only study "images of women" in works by men or even in works by women but also bring all the wide-ranging resources of literary criticism to study women's literary writing of all kinds. Feminist literary criticism and history, therefore, are not about "celebrating" women's writing. Such celebration had its place in early feminist criticism, which had the uphill task of making it known that there was a great deal more women's writing, and a great deal more deeply admirable and appealing women's writing, than most readers realized. But after a time such celebration starts to seem demeaning, starts to suggest that we doubt women's writing and need to compensate for our doubt by celebrating women's writing. Feminist literary criticism and women's writing overall have now come so far that we can accept the value of women's writing without needing to worry about such doubts. Now, instead of making feminist literary criticism about proving that women's writing is worth reading and studying, we can take that as a given and bring to it the full resources of our critical methods and energies.

Indeed, the now-dated focus on the "celebration" of women's history and writing—and of the overlapping categories of history and writing from the variety of racial, ethnic, and national peoples who have left a literary legacy—has long since reached the point where it can turn counterproductive. It can play into the hands of reactionaries who protest that African American studies or feminist studies, for example, are not serious intellectual pursuits but are just about celebration. Celebrating had its time and place and still has value on special occasions, but women's studies, African American studies, and the many other studies programs that now play a role in college, university, and international intellectual life, including—to speak to the immediate point—feminist literary criticism, are not about throwing a party. They may often be fun, and they may be proud, but as this chapter can show, they are now also as serious intellectual pursuits as any others.

Women as victims versus women as agents. By setting out to expose the abuses of patriarchy, early feminism and early feminist criticism sometimes seemed to see women mainly as objects and as victims. Partly in reaction to that exaggeration, more recent feminism increasingly draws attention to women's "subjectivity," their "agency," that is, their ability to imagine and shape their own lives. The term

subjectivity has a variety of histories, but for our purposes here the relevant history is the structuralist notion of a subject versus an object in a sentence as a model for subjects versus objects in cultural practices. Subjects do, and objects are done to. Feminist criticism continues to pay attention to what is done to women, to women's role as objects, but it also pays serious heed to women as doers, as subjects and agents, seeing a complex dialogue between women as objects of patriarchy and women as agents of their own future. Popular critics of feminism sometimes complain about what they call "victim feminism," which shows how little they have kept up with contemporary feminist thinking. Contemporary feminism, while it continues to value the study of what patriarchy has done to women (and to men), has also gone far beyond that early focus to concentrate on what women do and, in the case of literature and literary criticism, on what women write.

Some Antifeminist Myths About Feminism

1. It's all about victimization.
2. It's all about affirmation and celebration.
3. It's antileshian.
4. It's antiheterosexual.
5. It's anti-pleasure; it's humorless.
6. It's anti-male; it's about hating men.
7. It's for "radical kooks," bra burners, and "feminazis."

Myths 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 2 and 6, and perhaps 2 and 5 are each opposites: That is how prejudice works. Many such myths come from people who feel their privilege or comfort threatened by feminism. Sometimes they find something in feminism—or in what they wrongly suppose is feminism—that they do not like, and then they try to use that to define all feminism.

All these myths have to do with what has come to be called *straw feminism*. Straw feminism puts ridiculous ideas in the minds of people or TV, film, or literary characters whom antifeminists inaccurately describe as typical feminists. By misrepresenting feminism and feminists as ridiculous, and perhaps by pasting a ridiculous label on them like "feminazi," antifeminists try to make

feminism and feminists look silly, like something just for kooks, and definitely not like something for anyone with any sense.

But any movement as wide-ranging and changing as feminism is too multidimensional to be defined by its frightened opponents or its least convincing advocates. Those who believe in myth 7 and similar expressions resort to derogatory name-calling as a substitute for argument about the issues. Burning bras might have been amusing, but there is no record of feminists burning bras anywhere except in the fantasies of antifeminists. As this chapter shows, feminism is not any one thing. Instead, like other methods of criticism, it keeps changing as feminists debate among themselves.

SEX AND GENDER

In her influential *The Second Sex* (1949), the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir famously proclaimed: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir 283). Later, in 1975, Gayle Rubin described what she called the "sex/gender system" (Rubin 159), using the word *sex* for what Beauvoir says one is born with and the word *gender* for what Beauvoir describes as what one becomes. In the 1980s and usually continuing through current feminism, feminists—often influenced by Beauvoir or Rubin—use the terms *female* and *male* to refer to *sex*, and the terms *feminine* and *masculine* to refer to *gender*.

In this way of thinking, sex comes from biology and anatomy, while contemporary feminist theory usually sees gender as the constructed product of culture rather than the natural, inevitable product of biology and anatomy. In the word *constructed* we can hear the influence of structuralism and deconstruction. *Female* and *male* refer to essences, whereas poststructuralist feminists think in terms of constructed gender rather than of essences. Since the onset of third-wave feminism, then, the distinction between sex and gender has become a cornerstone of contemporary, nonessentialist feminist theory, because it suggests that gender proliferates into many different forms, like what Derrida calls the free play of signifiers or the free play of language.

All this means that there are many different ways to enact gender, many different ways to be female or male, not one essentialist way. Feminists see this sense of multiplicity as liberating. It means that it is best for women to choose how to be women, whether that means going to college and working outside the home or working in the

home to raise children, whether it means heterosexual desire or lesbian desire, driving a truck or baking cookies, wearing a pink dress or wearing jeans, studying physics or French, or any combination of these. And along the way, the hope is that feminism can also help men feel at liberty to choose how to enact their gender.

With its interest in the multiplicity of gender, as opposed to an essentialist notion of what women are and can be, contemporary feminism draws from Derrida and deconstruction, although some feminists suggest that feminist thinking anticipated Derrida. In its opening to many different ways to be female and male, this strain of feminist theory has overlapped with, helped with, and been helped by the growth of lesbian, gay, and queer studies. As we saw in the previous chapter, it has also helped bring out the way that Freudian psychoanalysis tells a story about the construction of gender, instead of supposing that sex and gender form a single essence.

Meanwhile, to some feminists—in a strain of argument often associated with the philosopher Judith Butler, though it did not begin with her—even the liberating distinction between sex and gender seems constraining. They argue that even sex is constructed, rather than inherent, because we cannot understand sexual anatomy apart from cultural ideas about gender, which structure how we construct, understand, and interpret anatomy. As it happens, anatomy books differ over the centuries in the ways that they present sexual anatomy (as Thomas Laqueur has shown), because how we see is shaped by how we think, and how we think varies across time and geography and even from person to person. In this way of thinking, sex is always already gender, that is to say, always already constructed. Each culture sees what it supposes is essentially female or male in different ways from other cultures, and even within a given culture we can find variations and differences.

Feminist (and other words)

This will seem too obvious to many readers, but experience and the pleading of many teachers suggest that a little clarification can save beginners from comical goofs. Do not confuse *feminine* with *feminist*. *Feminine* refers to a style of gender, whereas *feminist* refers to a commitment to respecting women. And *feministic* is not an accepted word, so it sounds clueless and might even make your readers laugh or groan.

FEMINISMS

French and Anglo-American feminisms. For a time beginning in the 1980s, many writings in feminist theory and criticism made a distinction between French feminism and Anglo-American feminism, a distinction that now seems exaggerated but still carries a legacy. Whatever its limits, the opposition between French feminism and Anglo-American feminism helped call Anglo-American readers' attention to provocative challenges from French feminists. Three influential writers, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, came to dominate Anglo-American readers' awareness of French feminism, even though none of them is originally French, and, as we might imagine, there are many other French feminist writers. Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva have differences among themselves, and their ideas have developed and varied across many writings, but they each see the predominant language as masculine, or *phallogocentric*, and they each try to imagine feminine alternatives to phallogocentric language.

Cixous [pronounced *seek-sool*] argues that feminine writing, or *l'écriture féminine* (*écriture* is French for "writing"), has its source in the infant's prelinguistic relation to the mother, supposedly before the infant establishes boundaries and differentiations between the self and the rest of the world around it, that is, before the onset of what Lacan calls the symbolic. For her, the free play of language (we can hear Derrida's influence on Cixous) and linguistic celebration of the body evoke the prelinguistic relation to the mother. A woman's voice, for Cixous, "physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. . . . There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" (Cixous 251). At other times, however, Cixous makes a point of saying that gender does not come directly from bodies, that men can be feminine and women can be masculine.

Irigaray advocates a specifically woman's language that she sees in the language of women's pleasures and in the bodily shape of women's sexuality. For Irigaray, who sometimes writes in poetic rhythms that enact the language she advocates, woman "touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that carress each other" (Irigaray 24). As women, she writes, "We are luminous. Neither one



Figure 6.2 Luce Irigaray (1930–).

not two. I've never known how to count. Up to you. In their calculations, we make two. Really, two? Doesn't that make you laugh? An odd sort of two. And yet not one. Especially not one. Let's leave one to them: their oneness, with its prerogatives, its domination, its solipsism: like the sun's" (Irigaray 207).

Kristeva describes what she calls the *chora* or *semiotic*, based on the fetus's prelinguistic relation to the mother in the womb. (Her use of the term *semiotic* differs from other people's use.) By connecting women's writing to the prelinguistic relation to the mother, Kristeva and Cixous suggest, much as Irigaray suggests, that women's writing flows in rhythms outside the strutting logic and systemizing of language and linguistic structures. They see women's writing as evoking a freedom and unpredictability that they believe acculturated, rule-bound language tries to exile from our imaginations.

In effect, Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva ask whether women and men think and write in contrasting ways, and, if they do, then why? They suggest that women as a rule, or perhaps as a tendency and not as a rule, do more than men to retain their prelinguistic, imaginary relation to the mother. Or perhaps differences between women's bodies and men's bodies, as Irigaray argues, lead to differing ways of thinking and writing. Some feminists react against the idea that women and men write differently and fear that to believe so is to resurrect the very stereotypes that feminists set out to oppose. In that vein, French feminism, as associated with Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, is sometimes criticized as essentialist, as believing in an inherent, bodily femaleness rather than a culturally constructed feminine, that is to say, as seeing sex where other feminists say that we

should see gender. Some more admiring readers see the French feminists, by contrast, as teasingly, exaggeratedly, even ironically essentialist for the sake of provocation.

Monique Wittig, another prominent if still not as well-known French feminist, far more explicitly challenges essentialist notions of gender, astonishing her audience, in a 1978 lecture, by announcing that "lesbians are not women." For Wittig, who wrote novels, theory, and hybrids of fiction and theory, the very idea of gender, including the very idea of women and men, depends on taking heterosexual norms for granted. Wittig rejects second-wave feminist claims for a specifically women's culture, seeing such claims as depending on the sexist divisions between genders that they set out to oppose. She argues that lesbians have no place in the heterosexual way of thinking that naturalizes heterosexuality and centers on the experience of men. Therefore, she believes, the very presence of lesbians exposes the fraud in those heterosexual assumptions. She thus asks us to abolish altogether the distinction between women and men. Wittig's arguments have attracted less attention than the arguments of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva. Perhaps Wittig's ideas are more radical and thus harder to fit into the everyday assumptions that, for better or for worse, continue to shape most critical practice.

While Wittig gets less notice, many feminists see the linguistic, playful, theoretical, poststructuralist, and sometimes psychoanalytic interests of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva as different from the more empirical and historical approaches taken by influential English-writing innovators from the same era of feminist literary criticism. Rather than trying to find a specially feminine language, English-writing critics such as Nina Baym, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Elaine Showalter try to recover a history of women's writing and its interests and dialogues. For example, Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) sees Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* as a metaphor for the state of nineteenth-century women's writing. In Brontë's novel, Rochester proposes marriage to Jane while he secretly remains married to Bertha Mason, the "madwoman" he keeps locked in the attic. Seeing Bertha, Rochester's secret wife, as a double for Jane, his proposed public wife, Gilbert and Gubar read Bertha's caged expressiveness, her madness, as a metaphor for how patriarchal culture viewed women's writing.

Beyond French and Anglo-American feminisms, feminist critics from outside the French/Anglo-American divide, such as the Norwegian

Toril Moi and the Indian Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (on Spivak, see Chapter 10), have launched major critiques of Anglo-American feminist critical theory and literary critical practice, prodding Anglo-American critics to think more internationally and theoretically and to look critically at their own practices. Spivak, for example, notes that Bertha Mason is a Jamaican Creole, and Spivak therefore sees the British Rochester's caging of Bertha as figuring not only a cultural idea about women but also a colonialist idea about the colonized world and about the battered-down lives of colonized women. As critics who write in English and teach in English-speaking countries, such feminists as Moi and Spivak have reached English-speaking audiences more than many other international feminists.

Meanwhile, many feminists of color, including the African American novelist Alice Walker, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and the contributors to *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, called needed attention to the way that many early Anglo-American feminists sometimes wrote about women as if all women were white. Concerned that such narrowness came to define feminism, Walker proposed **womanism** as an alternative term to rename a feminism that no longer centers only on white women. While some feminists—or womanists—still use the term *womanism*, it has a lower profile than the rethinking of feminist ethnocentrism that Walker, Spivak, Anzaldúa (on Anzaldúa, see Chapter 10), bell hooks, Mohanty, Crenshaw, and other critics of color have encouraged. Crenshaw's concept of *intersectionality* underlines the need for feminists to move beyond thinking of women as if they were ordinarily white and underlines the need to include gender with other categories of identity. She studies the obstacles that black women face when the law and the courts respond to prejudice against women by seeing all women as if they were white, and respond to racism by seeing all blacks as if they were men. Crenshaw argues that such approaches overlook the specific, compound position of black women. (For more on intersectionality, see later in this chapter.)

In this light, feminist critics note, for example, that in Bharati Mukherjee's short story "Jasmine," the privileged white American feminist, Lara, can enjoy her new feminist liberties in part because she has the power to hire Jasmine, an undocumented immigrant from India, to take care of Lara's child and help with the cooking and housework. Jasmine leaps at the scraps of opportunity she finds in the United States, including her job as a "mother's helper," because, without the

privileges and cultural contexts that Lara has, she is ill prepared to understand when Lara and Lara's husband take advantage of her, both economically and sexually. The two women's different positions put them in competition with each other, but their dangerously cliché sense that a working-class woman like Jasmine has as much chance to control her future as Lara has keeps them from seeing how women can work against each other's interests. In short, not all women are alike, and not all women have the advantages that some women have. Feminism best serves its purpose of respecting women when it takes into account the differences among women and advocates for less privileged as well as for more privileged women, no easy task when women's interests compete across variations in class, nationality, education, and race.

It is now almost as routine for women of every race and region where women have access to public intellectual life to call themselves feminists as it is for Anglo-American women to call themselves feminists. Indeed, French feminism, Anglo-American feminism, and the rest of the world's feminism have long since moved beyond the unfortunate binary opposition that for some years seemed to oversimplify feminism into French feminism versus Anglo-American feminism, when actually, of course, feminists of all stripes learn from each other, and feminist thinkers come from every race and class and from all over the world.

HOW TO INTERPRET: FEMINIST EXAMPLES

We might imagine a variety of feminist approaches, for example, to Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises* or Dorothy Parker's story "A Telephone Call" (not as widely taught as Hemingway's novel, but still a widely read, easily available classic). We could argue that Brett Ashley, the femme fatale flapper of *The Sun Also Rises*, shows Hemingway's sexism, or his novel's sexism, because she is reduced to a mere sex object or because she makes a mess of her life. Or we could argue that in Parker's story the frantic monologue of a pitiful woman desperate for her lover to call shows Parker's sexism, or her story's sexism. After all, the desperate narrator has made herself dependent entirely on a man's affection (and implicitly not just on any man but on a cad), and like Brett, she makes a mess of her life. Such arguments work in the typical manner of early feminist criticism, including images-of-women criticism, though at first such criticism paid less attention to writing by women. The point lies in interpreting characters

(not so much form, ideologies, or language), and the goal is to ask whether they are good characters or bad characters. According to whether the characters are good or bad role models for readers, such arguments issue a verdict for or against the novel or story.

While such readings were routine in early feminist criticism and remain on the table today, especially in classroom discussions, they now seem too simple. Even within images-of-women criticism, we can start to play with such readings in more challenging ways. We might see these works' portrayals of unfortunate women not as representing a belief that that is how women are, in their essence, but rather as critiquing that way of imagining women's possibilities and so suggesting that women can differ from Brett or from the anguished monologist of "A Telephone Call" waiting for the telephone to ring. Suddenly, by that gambit, without changing our observation of details, we turn the interpretation upside down, and what at first looked like antifeminist writings can now, from this other perspective, look like feminist writings.

In turn, then, the possibility of turning an interpretation upside down offers great promise and yet also great danger for images-of-women feminist criticism and for all critical judgments based on characterizing models of identity, including gender, race, religion, sexuality, nationality, and many other categories. If we find a portrayal offensive in a movie or a novel, for example, then we—or someone else—could also flip that judgment upside down by reading the same portrayal as a critique of the offensive image, rather than an endorsement of it. Such flexibility offers powerful resources for interpretation and judgment, but it also carries risks. We probably want to retain the ability to say that certain representations disturb us. We might even want to advise writers and moviemakers to keep away from those disturbing representations. If we can turn any critical judgment upside down, then we risk making it seem as if anything goes, as if we have to endorse any representation. And we might find that outcome ethically and culturally dangerous. Writers and moviemakers could use the logic of reversible judgment to rationalize the most disturbing images and stories. In that light, as much as we may find images-of-women criticism too simple and constricting, we may sometimes still want to hold on to it.

We probably cannot find a one-size-fits-all texts and all-readers solution to this provocative contradiction between opposite interpretive possibilities. We have to keep both possibilities in mind and go through the sometimes difficult—but not always so difficult—process

of sorting them out case by case. The possibility of flipping an admiring or a rejecting interpretation upside down might give us pause and encourage caution and modesty before we indulge in broad-brush rejections or endorsements along the lines of binary absolutes like antifeminist versus feminist.

Instead of leaping to condemn or praise the characters, we might ask what happens to gender in these works, not only in the characters but also in the form that renders them. "A Telephone Call" poses questions, for example, about the gendering of dialogue, of telephone calls (or today of texting or social networking as well as telephone calls), of asking questions ("What are you doing Saturday night?"). There is nothing inherent in the form of dialogue to require that some people get to call while others can only be called or that we blame some people for calling while we blame others for not calling. Cultural convention draws those lines between categories of gender: men call, and women are called. But we could have drawn the lines in other ways or not drawn them at all. The rules are cultural constructions, not inevitable consequences of sexual difference.

We might wonder at the *defamiliarization* (to use the Russian formalist term from Chapter 3) that allows readers to recognize and laugh at, and perhaps look critically at, patterns of gender that get so taken for granted that readers might not have thought much about them before—including patterns of rationalization or self-serving resort to religion, as when the woman in the story pleads with God to make her boyfriend call her on the telephone. Yet the character herself seems to see through her own self-deceptions. Even so, she cannot make her ability to see through them keep her from getting stuck in them. In these ways, gender comes freighted with cultural compulsion. We see how it confines us, yet we keep running headlong into those confinements, even when we know better.

While the telephone—excitingly almost new at the time of this story (1928), at least for individual middle-class residences and single women—might seem to promise a bridge to more flexible structures of gender, its liberating potential ends up bowing down in subservience to the same old demeaning hierarchies. We might wonder how that compares to the new technologies of our own time. Here we have a woman who cannot converse, at least not with the person she wants to converse with, yet right before her is a technology that promises to open the gates of dialogue.

At the same time, though the character cannot converse, Parker can, for her story reaches an audience. It comically shows a

woman—Parker—defying the limits on women that trap the character in the story. Feminine agency and feminine reduction to mere object status thus sit together on a fence of alternating critiques and possibilities, like the narrator's flitting back and forth between the urge to call her lover and the conviction that it would court disaster to call him. The continuously shifting options spoof the reduction of gender relations to a tortuous power imbalance that paints women as mere victims—and set off a good laugh at the same imbalance, leaving us to debate whether the laughter helps crack the barriers it spoofs, or not.

Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises* may seem like an opposite figure, for she would certainly telephone her lover or any other man, straight or gay—or just walk up to him. But even in their opposition to each other, both Parker's and Hemingway's characters are provocative clichés of the feminine. Lady Brett parades through Hemingway's novel as a femme fatale and an iconic figure of Woman, whether endorsing such clichés, parodying them, or—deconstructively—both at once. But she is also portrayed as masculine, from her name to her short hair to her quenchless erotic initiative. Under this light, sex starts to reappear as gender, and gender no longer seems like so certain a category, for Brett blends and bends masculinity with femininity in ways that might make us question the conventional identifications between female and feminine and male and masculine.

At the same time, everything we learn about Brett comes mediated through the narration and focalizing of the narrator, Jake Barnes, and so in a sense characterizes his gender as well as hers and perhaps characterizes his more reliably than hers. Yet that obsessive mediation also makes his gender needily dependent on hers or on his perception of the relation between his and hers. His interest in her masculine femininity and her feminine masculinity invites interpretations of him, but it also invites interpretations that, as the reference to formal features such as his narration and focalization may suggest, go beyond the old-fashioned criticism that only addresses character.

A variety of cultural issues arise in the preoccupation with watching Brett, or with Jake's watching of Brett, or Jake's watching of himself and others watching Brett, or Hemingway's watching Jake watch. And they arise with our watching as well, or with the history of many critics and readers watching so much watching and feeling compelled to use it to pit one character's model of gender against another's, as if to weigh and judge them. Gender starts to appear as a topic and means for a culture to debate its future, and before long, in *The Sun*

Also Rises, it connects to conflicting ways of thinking about war, economics, sports, nationality, ethnicity, commodification, and on and on. No interpretation can take on all the possibilities, but any interpretation that gets beyond the basics will pursue its choices far beyond the opening gestures I have pointed to here—and that is where the interest lies. Feminist criticism is not about labeling books as good or bad, sexist or nonsexist. It is about interpreting them in light of the feminist rethinking of women and women's positions. By respecting women and by thinking through the implications of that respect, feminist criticism leads us to think through anything in culture that has to do with women and gender, which potentially is everything.

FEMINISM AND VISUAL PLEASURE

Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), one of the most influential articles in feminist criticism, can help us consider feminist film criticism as well as feminist literary and cultural criticism. I will also use it as a point of departure to a variety of issues in more recent feminist criticism that go well beyond what Mulvey's article addresses.

Bringing psychoanalysis and structuralist narratology together with feminism, Mulvey describes classic Hollywood cinema as organized around a binary opposition between a masculine spectator, the subject, and what we might call a feminine spectated, the object. The



Figure 6.3 Laura Mulvey (1941-).

spectator enacts what, drawing on psychoanalysis, has come to be called the *gaze*. The masculine subject gazes, and the feminine object is gazed at. To Mulvey, this process goes beyond what we see on the screen. It reaches out and draws in the audience. Conventional film editing, the norm in classic Hollywood cinema and still so pervasive a norm in contemporary film and video that most spectators are not even aware of it, aligns spectators in the audience with the masculine spectator in the film through subjective camera and shot/reverse shot editing. The expression *subjective camera* refers to camera work that looks as if through the eyes of a character, thus constructing a visual focalizer, like the focalizer in verbal narrative. As we saw in Chapter 3, *shot/reverse shot* refers to editing that invites us to look through the eyes of a character. Mulvey describes how the combination of subjective camera and shot/reverse shot editing leads audiences to look through the eyes of an actor and at an actress, identifying with the actor's gaze at the actress. The process that she describes is sometimes called the *masculinization of spectators*, because through gendering the camera and the editing, the conventions of film can sway spectators—women and men both—into identifying with a masculine subject position (stance or point of view).

The Feminist Critique of Objectification

Mulvey's argument is a version of the standard, and to most readers probably familiar, feminist critique of objectification. Many people misunderstand that critique, because the term *objectification* can have two different but related meanings. It can mean turning someone into a mere thing. Or it can mean treating someone as an other, that is, seeing someone, grammatically, in the position of an object (the one who is acted upon) in relation to someone else in the position of a subject (the one who acts). The first meaning, treating someone as a mere thing, describes a disturbing objectification, but the second meaning describes an inevitable objectification.

In the second sense, then, objectification itself is not the problem. There is nothing necessarily wrong with objectifying something or someone as an other. It is even inevitable. We all look at others and are looked at by others, and not only in the narrow sense of looking. For whether we are sighted or blind,

we look at others in the broader sense of perceiving others. And when we look or are looked at, we often respond with indifference or with pleasure.

Looking in itself, therefore, is not a problem. And seeing someone as an object, in the sense of seeing someone as an other, is not a problem. The problem comes with reducing women (or anyone else) to little or nothing except their status as an object, when by object we mean a mere thing, or a merely sexual thing. The sexuality, then, is also not a problem. The problem is the abusive reduction of the object to her or his sexuality and to nothing else. Mulvey associates abusive objectification with classic Hollywood cinema and stereotypical masculine patterns of the gaze.

Mulvey also argues that classic Hollywood cinema tends to film men (those who look) in three-dimensional space, granting them movement to either side or backward and forward within the filmed space. By contrast, it tends to film women (the looked-at objects) in two-dimensional space. They often hold relatively still, suggesting stasis, especially while men look at them and while the audience is drawn into looking at them through the men's gaze. The women often appear in a framed space, perhaps standing in a door frame or before a window frame, underlining their position as two-dimensional static objects, like pictures in a picture frame. With the male gaze focused on women, this style of filmmaking, so standard and conventional that viewers do not usually even recognize it as a style, associates men with voyeurism, control, and authority, expressed as a will to investigate and fetishize. Mulvey sees that will as sadistic for men and as confining for women.

For Mulvey, writing before DVDs, YouTube, streaming, or mobile phones that can show or make movies, the pattern she describes is specific to traditional film, shown to a large audience on a big screen in a dark theater:

The mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy. Moreover the extreme contrast between darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance

of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world. (Mulvey 17)

Though Mulvey points her argument specifically to classic film, related patterns are common in contemporary film, in music videos, and in written literature. Written literature often lingers over a narrator's or a focalizer's erotic gaze at a focalized character and often at a focalized woman.

Mulvey declares boldly: "It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article" (16). She sees traditional cinema as a corrupt pleasure, and she believes that filmmakers can invent a new cinema beyond the sexism that defines the old cinema, if they reconceive film in a way that destroys its corrupt pleasure. She therefore calls for filmmakers "to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment" while believing that "his destroys the satisfaction." "Women," she concludes, "cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret" (26). Mulvey thus calls for a radically new style of film that is not based on the "look," the "gaze," or subjective camera and focalizing narrative. The alternative style that she calls for would be fragmented rather than dreamily continuous and hypnotic. Characters—if there were characters at all—might step out of their roles to address the camera or the audience and break the audience's identification with the characters, splintering the subjective camera and editing typical of mainstream film.

After Mulvey: expanding visual pleasure and critical spectatorship. Mulvey's argument—which she herself has gone on to rethink through later perspectives—has carried great force in feminist film criticism and beyond, in literary studies and in gender studies in general, but critics have also raised objections to her model. Even among critics who disagree with her, though, many of the ideas that Mulvey offered continue to propel critical discussion, even while the arguments take a shape opposite to what Mulvey suggested. In that sense, by reviewing the critiques of Mulvey's argument we can sample a good variety of additional and more contemporary feminist theory and criticism, using Mulvey's work as a bridge to more recent questions in feminist theory and in the many other strains of theory that contemporary feminism engages with.

Some critics see Mulvey as essentialist. They believe she paints gender as an absolute category rather than as a category that varies across different times and cultures. They read her as saying that this is what men do: they look, and they look in abusive ways; and this is what women do: they are looked at, and they remain passive. Mulvey can invite that objection, but such an objection also misses that she describes sexist patterns that she opposes. She does not see them as frozen in time and space, for she believes that describing them can help us change them.

Others object that Mulvey writes prescriptive criticism, because she prescribes that filmmakers produce certain kinds of films. That is, they object because she tells filmmakers what to do. She assumes that a given form—fragmented film without the gaze and without subjective camera and editing—will necessarily produce a given politics. More specifically, she assumes that traditional form necessarily produces a sexist politics and experimental form necessarily produces a feminist politics.

That requires a belief in what communications theorists call technological determinism, the idea that a given technology produces a predictable result. For example, when people say (as once people did say) that telephones will lead to equality by letting anyone call anyone else, that word processing will destroy writing, that fax machines, cell phones, or social networking will bring electoral democracy to China, or that the Internet will free people to challenge mainstream culture through an open exchange of ideas, they suppose that a given technology necessarily produces a predictable cultural change. They usually say as well that the technology is valuable, or dangerous, depending on what they think of the change. Skeptics see technological determinism as a fallacy (along the lines of the intentional and affective fallacies proposed by new critics), because the same technology often produces dramatically different results. In the Facebook-launched Arab Spring of 2011, the same technology led to different results in different countries and even in different parts of the same countries. For that reason, skeptics would see the technology itself as unable to determine the outcome. They see culture as determining the consequences of technology at least as much as technology determines the culture.

From this skeptical perspective, Mulvey gets caught in the fallacy of technological determinism. As it turns out, the experimental film forms that Mulvey advocated soon grew commonplace in, for example, music videos, but I doubt that any serious critic would propose

that the fragmented, disruptive cinematic form typical of music videos has usually led to feminist filmmaking. The same form can work in a sexist or a feminist way, depending on how we use it, just as two poems can use the same meter and stanzaic form and yet produce dramatically different effects. The form in itself will not predict the outcome. But by buying into technological determinism, Mulvey essentializes form.

Mulvey has also taken criticism for supposing that the text (the film) shapes or determines the spectator (the audience, the reader). The film, she believes, constructs all spectators as masculine spectators, in effect converting women to a masculine subject position. More specifically, although she does not say so, in her model the film constructs all spectators as masculine heterosexual spectators. By taking the heterosexuality for granted and not making it explicit, Mulvey naturalizes heterosexuality. She ignores queerness. (More generously, we might say that she reads classic cinema as ignoring or masking queerness.) She does not consider queer spectators of any kind—trans, bi, lesbian, or gay—or any spectators who take into account a variety of potential sexualities in themselves or in others. In Mulvey's model, spectators may or may not walk into the theater with any variety of desires in their minds or histories, but the film turns them all into masculine heterosexual spectators.

Of course, that is part of the power and provocativeness of Mulvey's argument. But as many of her readers have insisted, it just isn't so. Some spectators, for example, will look at the feminine sex object on the screen and feel little or no sexual attraction. Some spectators will feel attracted to the masculine spectator on the screen. In this sense, when Mulvey supposes that the text determines its spectator, she leaves out the possibility that the spectator also determines the text, as in reader-response criticism. (For more on reader-response criticism, see Chapter 11.) Even masculine heterosexual spectators might see a film inviting them into an abusively objectifying model of masculine heterosexuality and respond by saying "No," or respond with less enthusiasm than some other masculine heterosexual spectators. Queer spectators might simply not participate in the heterosexual invitation, or they might participate satirically.

Indeed, Mulvey's approach, with its prescriptive sense that filmmakers need to provide good examples for their audience, leaves no room for irony or humor. On the screen, a heterosexual invitation can come across, in some spectators' eyes, as a parody of heterosexual presumptions, even as camp. Similarly, Mulvey does not anticipate

the possibility of what has come to be called critical spectators, that is, active spectators who resist the system, as opposed to spectators who passively allow the system to seduce them into naturalizing its assumptions.

Different critics hold different beliefs about how easy or difficult it is to resist dominant cultural assumptions that film or any other media set out to draw us into. To some critics, resistance seems easy and routine. To others, the dominant assumptions are so entrenched that they make resistance almost impossible. In that case, much of what passes for resistance never adds up to much more than allowing us to think that we are resisting, so that we keep ourselves from realizing how little we really resist and how much more we remain compliant. As we will see in Chapter 8, Marxist theorists have developed models for how to think through this debate over how people do or do not resist prevailing cultural assumptions.

As part of Mulvey's underestimation of critical spectators, and in much the same way that she naturalizes heterosexuality, she idealizes the theatrical setting and naturalizes cultural patterns that vary greatly. Let us return, for example, to Mulvey's description of a traditional film shown to a large audience on a big screen in a dark theater, where the film seems to unwind magically and seduce the audience into a dreamy world of spectators isolated from each other, reduced to their individual relation to the film on the screen. Surely spectators are not always isolated. Many people go to the theater partly to enjoy their erotic relation to another spectator sitting next to them. Others spend an entire movie craning to peer around a taller person in front of them or lamenting a nearby loudmouth or, now, a distracting cell phone addict. We all recognize the difference between watching a movie with a large, talking, laughing audience and watching a movie in an empty theater or in the darkened theater that Mulvey describes as isolating spectators from each other, reducing them to their gaze at the actresses and actors on the screen.

When I was an undergraduate, before we had the technology to watch movies at home, and in the heyday of new excitement about campus feminism and the heyday of film as a campus social outing, it was routine for spectators—not only women—to hiss at moments of a film that we found misogynist. That was part of the fun of going to movies, and it helped politicize spectatorship and make it a communal rather than an isolating pleasure. White, middle-class audiences typically speak back to a movie less than black audiences, especially in comedies that play with black social expectations. All of us have

Resistance

seen films that speak from cultural assumptions that we do not share, whether in terms of politics, class, sexuality, religion, race, or our personal histories. And contrary to Mulvey's notion of the passive spectator, we sometimes—though Mulvey might say not often enough—explicitly reject a film's presumptions, even while, as Mulvey says, the film unwinds before us as if magically. Sometimes, spectators yell out and make an entire theater angry or make it burst into laughter or both.

It may be that, as a rule, spectators remain too passive, too accepting of a film's cultural assumptions and, as Mulvey says, of the cultural assumptions embedded in the very technology of camera work and editing, including sexist assumptions. But spectators are not the passive victims that Mulvey supposes. Mulvey deserves credit for helping women get out from under the passivity they may have suffered from under sexist film practices, but her rejection of filmic pleasure comes out of an earlier, victim-focused stage of feminism. We can see why feminism went through that stage in its early years, even succumbing to what may now seem like antipleasure feminism, but women and men both have come a long way since then, even if not a long-enough way. Both on screen and in the audience, women,



Figure 6.4 Classic Hollywood cinema: What do spectators do—with their eyes and with their thoughts and desires—when the camera gazes at the star? Lauren Bacall in *To Have and Have Not*.

queer or straight, are not always passive victims of an abusive masculine heterosexual gaze. Women on the screen now more often move through three-dimensional space, even if sometimes in the explicit gender reversals of films like *Thelma and Louise*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *Sal*, and *The Hunger Games*, which necessarily depend on the patriarchal expectations that they reverse or spoof. Even in classic Hollywood films, women are not only gazed at. They have their own gaze, whether looking back at those who look at them or just looking—on their own initiative. And women in movies or watching movies look at both women and men.

Mulvey herself looks. She describes how the erotic gaze at a woman, often a “performing woman,”

takes the film into a no man's land outside its own time and space. Thus Marilyn Monroe's first appearance in *The River of No Return* and Lauren Bacall's songs in *To Have and Have Not*. Similarly, conventional closeups of legs (Dietrich, for instance) or a face (Garbo) integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative; it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon, rather than verisimilitude, to the screen. (19–20)

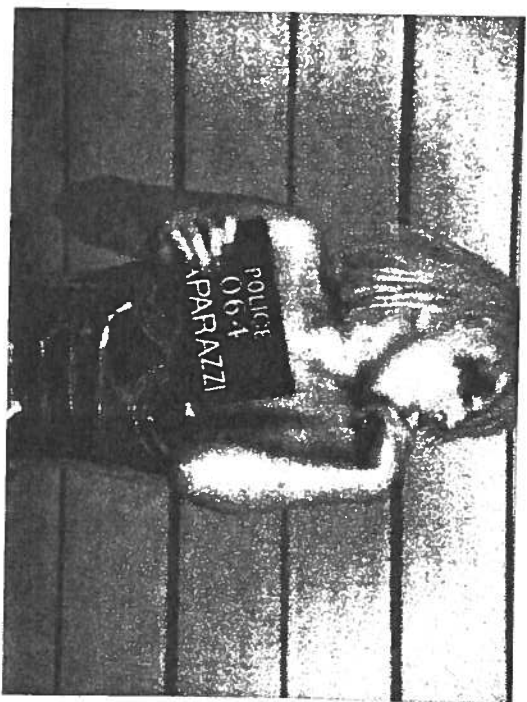


Figure 6.5 Music videos: What do spectators do—with their eyes and with their thoughts and desires—when the camera gazes at the star? Do contemporary music videos overlay spectatorship with a difference-making irony? Or does the irony end up preserving an updated version of the same old same old? Lady Gaga in *Paparazzi*.

We can see the same process in verbal narrative when a focalizer's or narrator's eye slows the pace of narrative to gaze lingeringly at a focalized character. At such moments, the mobile focalizer halts, interrupting his mobility (I say *his*, since Mulvey writes about masculine gazers), and the static position of the immobile, flat feminine space gains ascendancy, with a mix of recovered power and constrained stasis. We can hear that sense of feminine power in Mulvey's excited description of such iconic figures as Monroe, Bacall, Dietrich, and Garbo, actresses whose characters often look at men as the men look at them (Fig. 6.4). And sometimes they look at other women, as women spectators surely both gaze at the actresses and identify with their position of being gazed at and, sometimes, of gazing back.

As women look, perhaps some are "masculinized," as in the model that Mulvey proposes for classic Hollywood films. But surely many women do not limit or sway their gender to match a film's expectations. Either way, women do not become any less women through their looking.

Moreover, after Mulvey's article appeared, now that movies have reached the home and seemingly everywhere else, viewing habits have changed, as Mulvey herself has discussed in her later writing (Fig. 6.5). The lights are on. The conversation often continues while the film shows. People walk in and out. We stop the film, replay it, slow it down, leave it on while we walk away, or leave it on as background for other activities, and often we watch it again (or at least play it again) over and over. Mulvey's technological-determinist formula might lead us to expect that such changes would loft us away from sexist film, but while popular film may not be as pervasively demeaning to women as it used to be, it is hardly a paragon of feminist equality. The broader culture, still saturated with sexism, continues to help shape how people produce and interpret film and other cultural processes, more than the technology itself determines the culture.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE INTERDISCIPLINARY ETHOS OF CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM

Contemporary feminism is energetically interdisciplinary. Feminists build alliances with other areas of study. As we will see in later chapters, especially as we review queer studies, postcolonial studies, and ecocriticism, contemporary feminist theory often engages with and reshapes other areas of critical theory. The interdisciplinary energy of

contemporary feminism comes across especially through the growing discussion of intersectionality.

In 1989 and 1991 legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw published articles about what she calls *intersectionality*, and those articles have gradually grown in influence. *Writing from an intersection of feminist antiracist, black antisexist, and critical race studies perspectives* (on critical race studies, see Chapter 10), Crenshaw argues that people working against antiblack racism tend to think of blacks as men and overlook black women. Meanwhile, people working against sexism tend to think of women as white and, again, overlook black women. Without realizing it, antiracist and antisexist theorists and activists often suppose that we can describe the plight of black women by adding together the plight of blacks and the plight of women. But Crenshaw argues that merely adding the categories erases the specific obstacles that work against black women.

Crenshaw gathers a devastating series of examples. She begins with a legal case. Before 1964, General Motors hired no black women. Then, when the economy sunk into recession in 1970, GM fired all its black women employees, following the pattern of "last hired, first fired." Five fired black women sued for discrimination against black women. The court ruled that the fired black women could not sue as black women. As blacks, they could sue for discrimination against blacks. And as women, they could sue for discrimination against women. But they could not sue for discrimination against black women. It did not matter that they were last hired because for many years GM did not hire black women at all. The black women were caught in a feedback loop, hired only in a time frame that also got them fired. The court's indifference to the feedback loop made the specific vulnerability of black women legally invisible.

Similarly, Crenshaw looks at the position of black women in the prosecution of rape. She shows, as other scholars had shown before her, that black men accused of rape are much more likely to be convicted than white men accused of rape. And when convicted, black men tend to receive much longer prison terms than white men. Black men especially receive longer terms when convicted of raping white women. But Crenshaw extends those earlier observations by noticing that studies of such patterns pay attention to the convicted rapists without paying much attention to the victims, especially when the victims are black women. She shows evidence that black women's



Figure 6.6 Kimberlé Crenshaw (1959–).

testimony against accused rapists is far less likely to be believed than white women's testimony. Prejudices against black women's behavior tend to trivialize or discredit their testimony because of a belief that black female victims probably "asked for it" or were already too "ruined" to be hurt by rape. Crenshaw notes a study (of Dallas County in Texas) that showed that men convicted of raping black women received average prison terms of two years. Men convicted of raping Latina women received average prison terms of five years. And men convicted of raping Anglo women received average prison terms of ten years (Crenshaw, "Mapping" 1269). Women of color, she concludes, do not get the same recognition and respect as white women.

Crenshaw also enters the vexed debate about racism and misogyny in certain hip-hop lyrics and in the critique of those lyrics. She notes three much-discussed responses to controversial lyrics. One response defends allegedly misogynist lyrics as artful satire in a black tradition of satire. Another response attacks the criticism of the lyrics, calling

such criticism racist (for the way it paints black male rappers as anti-mals, and so on). A third, feminist response attacks the lyrics as sexist. Crenshaw argues that all three of these responses typically leave out the intersectional position of black women. Defenders of the lyrics who would not tolerate racist jokes as satire accept the same kinds of jokes when they degrade black women. The racist attacks on the lyrics trouble Crenshaw not only for their racism but also for the same critics' indifference to similar lyrics from white performers and their indifference, again, to the position of black women. And feminist critiques of misogynist hip-hop lyrics tend to sensationalize white women victims of black men's language of violence and misogyny while, once more, they erase the black women who often bear the biggest burden of offensive lyrics.

Through these and many other examples, Crenshaw argues that we can only understand the position of black women by thinking of black women as both blacks and women, not as blacks plus women or as women plus blacks. Everyone has more than one identity, and we cannot understand the perception of identity by thinking about identities one at a time. A "contradiction arises," she argues, "from our assumptions that" black women's

claims of exclusion must be unidirectional. Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.

Judicial decisions which premise intersectional relief on a showing that Black women are specifically recognized as a class are analogous to a doctor's decision at the scene of an accident to treat an accident victim only if the injury is recognized by medical insurance. Similarly, providing legal relief only when Black women show that their claims are based on race or on sex is analogous to calling an ambulance for the victim only after the driver responsible for the injuries is identified. (Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing" 149)

Especially in her more recent work, Crenshaw notes that her argument is not so much about identity as about the legal and institutional structures that respond to identity through cultural assumptions and through laws and court rulings about discrimination and rape, and even in specific institutional practices such as decisions about

who can—and who cannot—get admitted to shelters for battered women. In these ways, the concept of intersectionality gains special force for feminist inquiry in black studies, where Crenshaw partly begins, and also for feminist inquiry in race studies at large, including all races, and in queer and postcolonial studies. That is to say, the concept of intersectionality gains special force wherever institutions and cultural practices take singular identities so much for granted that they overlook the distinctive positions of multiple, less powerful identities.

The concept of intersectionality has everything to do with the interdisciplinary ethos of contemporary feminist theory. A review of intersectionality could fit in other chapters of this book as well as in this chapter on feminism. As we will see in the chapters to come, contemporary feminists pay particular attention to parallel, reinforcing, and crisscrossing routes of intersectionality across gender, sexual orientation, class, race, postcolonialism, and environmentalism.

* * * * *

In that spirit of interdisciplinary alliance, readers can probably see, by now, that it would be hard to think seriously about women and the feminine without also thinking seriously about men and the masculine, and so feminism has led to gender studies. And some feminists and women's studies scholars believe that feminism has reached a point where the women's studies programs that feminists built in colleges and universities, often against great odds, should now evolve into gender studies programs. Other feminists think that changing women's studies programs into gender studies programs will sacrifice or betray many of feminist scholars' hard-won advances. Especially in a world that continues to undervalue the role of women, they believe, we need to sustain women's studies as an enclave for intellectual work that otherwise might not get done. Some programs try to have it both ways, changing from women's studies programs to programs in women and gender studies or gender and women's studies. Among other things, the rubric of "gender" can seem to offer a safe place for queer studies, especially in public universities that may fear a taxpayers' backlash against queer studies.

Intellectually, however, feminist studies and women's studies have generated so much momentum toward rethinking gender that it would be impossible to practice them thoughtfully without rethinking heterosexuality and queerness, as we have seen through the

discussions provoked by thinking about feminism and film. Feminism and queer studies are not the same, but queer studies has found some of its intellectual momentum in feminism, and feminism in turn has drawn on the intellectual challenges of queer studies.

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Queer Studies

Just as deconstructionists see everything as multiple and feminists see many ways to be a woman and many ways to enact gender, so queer studies suggests that there are many ways to enact gender and sexual desire. The growth of feminism helped prepare the ground for the growth of queer studies, which in turn led to rethinkings of feminism. We can see that multidirectional cross talk in the discussion of post-Mulvey ideas about feminist film theory in the previous chapter. Though Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" did not address queer studies, the feminist issues it posed gave critics new ways to pursue queer interpretations, which in turn helped critics rethink the feminist issues.

Again, as in feminism, the motive for queer studies comes not so much from a method per se, though it may lead to new methods, as from thinking about an identity category (or an unstable, shifting constellation of identity categories). It comes also from thinking about the way that, across history, cultures have understood or repressed queer acts, enacted queer identities, or abused or denied the existence of queer people. In this context, I will echo the introduction to feminism in the previous chapter and say that queer studies is a simple concept. It is about taking queer acts, life, and thought seriously and treating them respectfully.

Queer studies has grown out of and can include lesbian studies and gay studies, but queer studies does gay and lesbian studies with a difference. Lesbian and gay studies address sexual orientation and people who identify as lesbian or gay and compare them to people