

CULTURAL STUDIES



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*Knowing how
he likes to be
kissed and where
he enjoys being
touched, will add
spice to lovemaking*

Time stood
still while Bruce
and I kissed

**GOOD
COOKING**

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CULTURAL STUDIES

Volume 5 Number 2 May 1991

CULTURAL STUDIES is an international journal, dedicated to the notion that the study of cultural processes, and especially of popular culture, is important, complex, and both theoretically and politically rewarding. It is published three times a year. Its international editorial collective consists of scholars representing the range of the most influential disciplinary and theoretical approaches to cultural studies.

CULTURAL STUDIES is in the vanguard of developments in the area worldwide, putting academics, researchers, students and practitioners in different countries and from diverse intellectual traditions in touch with each other and each other's work. Its lively international dialogue takes the form not only of scholarly research and discourse, but also of new forms of writing, photo essays, cultural reviews and political interventions.

CULTURAL STUDIES publishes articles on those practices, texts and cultural domains within which the various social groups that constitute a late capitalist society negotiate patterns of power and meaning. It engages with the interplay between the personal and the political, between strategies of domination and resistance, between meaning systems and social systems.

CULTURAL STUDIES seeks to develop and transform those perspectives which have traditionally informed the field—structuralism and semiotics, Marxism, psychoanalysis and feminism. Theories of discourse, of power, of pleasure and of the institutionalization of meaning are crucial to its enterprise; so too are those which stress the ethnography of culture.

Contributions should be sent to Professor Lawrence Grossberg, Dept. of Speech Communication, University of Illinois Urbana, 244 Lincoln Hall, 702 S.Wright St., Urbana, Ill. 61801, USA. They should be in duplicate and should conform to the reference system set out in the Notes for Contributors, available from the Editors or Publishers. They may take the form of articles of about 5000 words, of kites (short, provocative or exploratory pieces) of about 2000 words, or comments on cultural texts and events. Reviews, and books for review, should be sent to Dr Tim O'Sullivan, School of Arts, Leicester Polytechnic, P.O. Box 143, Leicester LE1 9EH.

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***Centre for the Study of
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EDITORIAL STATEMENT

LAWRENCE GROSSBERG AND JANICE RADWAY

Cultural Studies seeks to foster more open analytic, critical and political conversations by encouraging people to push the dialogue into fresh, uncharted territory. It is devoted to understanding the specific ways cultural practices operate in everyday and social formations. But it is also devoted to intervening in the processes by which the existing techniques, institutions and structures of power are reproduced, resisted and transformed. Although focused in some sense on culture, we understand the term inclusively rather than exclusively. We are interested in work that explores the relations between cultural practices and everyday life, economic relations, the material world, the State, and historical forces and contexts. The journal is not committed to any single theoretical or political position; rather, we assume that questions of power organized around differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, nationality, colonial relations, etc., are all necessary to an adequate analysis of the contemporary world. We assume as well that different questions, different contexts and different institutional positions may bring with them a wide range of critical practices and theoretical frameworks.

'Cultural studies' as a fluid set of critical practices has moved rapidly into the mainstream of contemporary intellectual and academic life in a variety of political, national and intellectual contexts. Those of us working in cultural studies find ourselves caught between the need to define and defend its specificity and the desire to resist closure of the ongoing history of cultural studies by any such act of definition. We would like to suggest that cultural studies is most vital politically and intellectually when it refuses to construct itself as a fixed or unified theoretical position that can move freely across historical and political contexts. Cultural studies is in fact constantly reconstructing itself in the light of changing historical projects and intellectual resources. It is propelled less by a theoretical agenda than by its desire to construct possibilities, both immediate and imaginary, out of historical circumstances; it seeks to give a better understanding of where we are so that we can create new historical contexts and formations which are based on more just principles of freedom, equality, and the distribution of wealth and power. But it is, at the same time, committed to the importance of the 'detour through theory'

as the crucial moment of critical intellectual work. Moreover, cultural studies is always interdisciplinary; it does not seek to explain everything from a cultural point of view or to reduce reality to culture. Rather it attempts to explore the specific effects of cultural practices using whatever resources are intellectually and politically available and/or necessary. This is, of course, always partly determined by the form and place of its institutionalization. To this end, cultural studies is committed to the radically contextual, historically specific character not only of cultural practices but also of the production of knowledge within cultural studies itself. It assumes that history, including the history of critical thought, is never guaranteed in advance, that the relations and possibilities of social life and power are never necessarily stitched into place, once and for all. Recognizing that 'people make history in conditions not of their own making', it seeks to identify and examine those moments when people are manipulated and deceived as well as those moments when they are active, struggling and even resisting. In that sense cultural studies is committed to the popular as a cultural terrain and a political force.

Cultural Studies will publish essays covering a wide range of topics and styles. We hope to encourage significant intellectual and political experimentation, intervention and dialogue. At least half the issues will focus on special topics, often not traditionally associated with cultural studies. Occasionally, we will make space to present a body of work representing a specific national, ethnic or social tradition. Whenever possible, we intend to represent the truly international nature of contemporary work, without ignoring the significant differences that are the result of speaking from and to specific contexts. We invite articles, reviews, critiques, photographs and other forms of 'artistic' production, and suggestions for special issues. And we invite readers to comment on the strengths and weaknesses, not only of the project and progress of cultural studies, but of the project and progress of *Cultural Studies* as well.

ARTICLES

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF *BEST*: ENTERPRISE MEETS DOMESTICITY IN THE PRACTICAL WOMEN'S MAGAZINES OF THE 1980S

JANICE WINSHIP

‘Selling Kinder and Küche?’

If one were looking for signs of postfeminism¹ in the 1980s, the new practical and domestic magazines for women would not seem the most fruitful cultural texts to scrutinize. Indeed, it is indicative of the cultural hierarchies and priorities in play for intellectual commentators that whilst the so-called style and youth magazines (for example, *The Face*, *i-D*, *Just Seventeen*) and the slicker women's magazines (*Cosmopolitan*, *Elle* and *Marie Claire*) feature in critical discussion of postfeminism (usually yoked to postmodernism)² there has been a veritable silence on the subject of the boom which has, in fact, most shaken the magazine market. In this article it is this slighted culture in its unlikely relation to postfeminist developments, and this boom, that I wish to investigate.

In the old camp are *People's Friend*, *My Weekly*, *Woman's Weekly*, *Woman's Own*, *Woman*, and *Woman's Realm*; in the new camp, *Chat*, *Best*, *Bella*, *Hallo!* and the latest recruits, *Me* and *Take A Break*.³ Since the 1950s a large number of women's magazines have been launched⁴ but until 1985, just two of them, enjoying only brief life-spans, were weeklies.⁵ For many in the industry the demise of the *mass* weeklies was inevitable. To survive they would have to target editorial at a focused band of readers, in the way of the monthlies' narrow casting (*Advertising Age's Focus*, May 1984). After all, circulation figures indicated that, while total sales of all women's magazines had declined, the

weeklies had been worst hit, with sales falling by almost half (from approximately 9.3 million in 1958 to 5.6 million in 1985).⁶

First the tabloid magazine *Chat* from the publishers of *TV Times* and then, more dramatically, the 'European invasion' of magazines (*Best* and *Bella* are owned by two arch-rival German giants in publishing, Gruner and Jahr, and Bauer, respectively, *Hallo!* by the Spanish company Hola, SA) challenged the insular British view. The new weeklies, *Best* and *Bella* especially, have been remarkably successful. The latter, admittedly with the aid of a massive advertising campaign ('an unprecedented £1 million a month' during 1988, *Observer*, 21 May 1989), has achieved a circulation of 1.3 million and *Best* 950,000. These launches, together with the spate of new monthlies⁷ has meant that by 1988 women's magazines were reaching more than 60 per cent of all women as compared to 42 per cent in 1986 (*Observer*, 30 October 1988). This is well down on the 1950s when it was reckoned that '5 out of 6 women saw at least one women's magazine every week' (cited in White, 1970:216), but the increase is still worth comment.

The expanding number of titles and increased readership have several explanations. One view is that by the 1980s women's magazines had lost sight of where women were at, and what they wanted from a magazine. New magazines with different editorial formulae were therefore attractive to women who had stopped buying, or never had bought, a magazine. (Research on *Prima* suggests that over half of its readers are in that category, White, 1986.)

Another view highlights a favourable economic climate and availability of advertising, encouraging expansion on the part of producers and increased consumption on the part of readers. Yet what has been innovative about the German launches has been their determination to go ahead without first securing advertising, a strategy anathema to UK publishers. Gruner and Jahr's conviction that spend hard enough to get editorial right and advertising will soon flow in, has rubbed off on to an ever cautious IPC, whose ill-fated up-market weekly, *Riva* (1988), closed after just seven weeks. They are currently allowing *Me* four or five years before its 'red ink turns black' (*Observer*, 21 May 1989.)

More cynically, it can be argued that regardless of women's objective requirements for their light reading matter, large conglomerates have their own insatiable economic needs. No less in publishing than in other industries, companies need to be strengthened to maintain steady profit margins. Diversification of products and a move into international markets are part of the process.

The form of the latter by European publishers is interesting. Until *Chat* appeared, *Cosmopolitan* was the only women's magazine in the UK which had its roots elsewhere—in the USA. Owned by the Hearst Corporation, *Cosmo* is published under a franchise system allowing the *Cosmo* recipe to be modified for local tastes under local control. *Prima*, *Best* and *Bella*, however, are editorially organized and run in Britain but owned and managed by German publishers who also direct operations in other European countries. There is a German and French

Prima, while *Best* is based on a French magazine, *Femme Actuelle*, which also has a Spanish version, *Mia*. More than that, all three of these magazines are printed in Germany and then sent back to the UK. In a similar way *Hallo!* (a cloning of the Spanish *Hola!*) is printed in Spain. Spreading the net wider, Rupert Murdoch's News International has gone into partnership with Hachette to deliver *Elle* and has brought the US title *New Woman* to the UK. Not to be outdone, IPC have joined forces with Groupe Marie Claire (as European Magazines) to offer *Marie Claire* to British readers.

Until recently, language and custom as well as government regulations have tended to keep the various national media markets apart. Hamish McRae suggests that, in contrast, cars, for example, are manufactured within a more integrated industry, 'in that you cannot tell in which country the car you are buying is made...Buy a Peugeot and it may be made in Coventry', but 'up to now, it simply has not been worth trying to build a cross-European media group because it has been possible to add value by passing experience across borders' (*Guardian*, 24 June 1988). One exception to that, Rupert Murdoch's News International, has worked not because of cross-border fertilization of ideas but 'because of the personality of its chief executive'. If amidst noisy publicity, but as yet with little cultural impact, satellite television is in the throes of undermining national sovereignty over our TV screens, the new women's magazines represent a comparable trend. For the first time in the magazine industry, 'Continental magazine skills [are] being let loose on the British marketplace' (*Guardian*, 24 June 1988). Publishing concepts have become transnational, though like many a current commodity exchange, the movement was initially one way— into the depressed UK market only. As Maggie Brown asked, only half facetiously: 'Where...is the [British owned] magazine...which will have German *hausfrau* knitting their own fish fingers?' (*Independent*, 12 August 1987) Late off the starting blocks, IPC has been playing European publishers at their own game in France, Spain, and Italy, where IPC claim *Essentials* is already the top selling monthly (*Independent*, 19 June 1989).⁸

The transferability of publishing concepts rests on the premise that 'women have common areas of interest across national frontiers' (*Campaign*, 1 July 1988). But therein lies the issue on which I primarily want to focus. Whereas *Hallo!* is a photo-news and *paparazzi* magazine, *Best* shares with *Chat*, *Bella* and *Me*, as well as with the monthlies *Prima* and *Essentials*, a practical emphasis in its editorial approach. Journalist critics have tended to regard this return to recipes, patterns and household tips (or as Deidre McSharry describes *Prima*: 'It tells you all the things you can do with dead mince', *The Sunday Times*, 5 February 1989) as, necessarily, a return to old-fashioned femininity. 'Selling Kinder und Küche' proclaimed one headline: '*Bella* is a soft-centred, soggy traditional read' (*Independent*, 30 September 1987). These are 'wholesome, housewife-and-mother' maga zines, insists the *The Sunday Times* article. They 'bring homecraft out of the closet' maintains a *New Society* piece (White, 1986:

15). And in a stinging review, 'Why the total woman is a real turn-off, Michele Hanson inveighs:

A new woman has emerged: she who brandishes her knitting patterns and makes her jam shamelessly. She is not so much Superwoman as Mrs Totality, unashamed of any aspect of herself, even the ordinary-homey-embroidering-a-cushion part... Naturally, enraged feminists have accused these magazines of setting women back 50 years. Is this the way to treat grown-up ladies? (*Guardian*, 22 January 1987)

Such comment does not allow that the 'grown-up ladies' might just *like* these magazines.⁹ The question then is why? What is their appeal? It is too glib to equate magazine content that foregrounds doing things in and around the home, with any necessary ideological backwardness on the part of either magazine or reader.

One simple, but not to be underestimated, attraction of these magazines is their value for money. But we also have to move beyond the obvious. Research by Valerie Walkerdine (1984) on girls' comics (*Bunty* and *Tracy*) provides some useful pointers in thinking about a complex appeal. The views expressed by Hanson and other commentators about what women's magazines *should* be doing, echo what Walkerdine calls a 'politics of rationalism' (Walkerdine, 1984: 167): do away with the biased, bad, unreal ideas about women (Kinder and Küche) and put in their place an undistorted reality (women juggling and struggling with home and work, maybe?). But Walkerdine warns:

If new content in whatever form does not map on to the crucial issues around desire, then we should not be surprised if it fails as an intervention. (182)

The success of these new magazines suggests that their content does indeed 'map on to the crucial issues around desire'. Notwithstanding their allegedly Germanic, no-nonsense editorial mix, do 'they engage with the very themes, issues, problems, fantasies (of escape, of difference) which the realist "telling it like it is"' (168) magazines, that Hanson and others implicitly seem to be advocating, do not?

In the remainder of this article I shall argue that the 'Kinder and Küche' label attached to these magazines is misplaced. Clearly magazines of 1980s' enterprise culture, yet they are more than the sum of their obsessively practical and rational parts. They tell of women's uneasy desires and their still-prevalent feelings about the impossibilities of womanhood.¹⁰

But first the mass weeklies in the 1950s, the period to which critics suggest that the new magazines are trying to return women.

Beyond a trade press

Writing about the weeklies of the 1950s, Mary Grieve, long-time editor of *Woman*, was in no doubt that, 'Because woman has this pre-occupation with, and responsibility for, material living, she feels the need for what is virtually a trade press' (Grieve, 1964:138). Over twenty-five years later Iris Burton, editorial director of *Prima* and *Best*, suggests that her magazines are 'centre of interest'. By the latter she means:

Shared by you and me, by your mother, my sister, the lady down the road, the girl in the office next door. It doesn't matter what you are doing by way of a career or lifestyle, there are certain elements that you still like to maintain and they tend to be the practical elements...But the other thing is that there are very few women, whether they are living on their own or have huge families or working or not, who don't maintain a home and who don't have the interest in it to want it to be lovely, who want to be creative with their homes. (Personal interview, 1988)

Despite a similarity in these two statements there is a difference between the idea of a 'trade press' and that of 'centre of interest' magazines. 'Trade press' and the perpetration of what Marjorie Ferguson has critically referred to as 'the cult of femininity' (Ferguson, 1983:5) go hand in hand, whereas there is no *inevitable* yoking of 'centre of interest' magazines and femininity. This argument rests on a further one: that 'trade press' depends on the operation of a dominant ideology of femininity; 'centre of interest' presupposes its dissolution. The dissolution involves a change in the magazine text and in readers' relation to that text.

The term 'trade press' is sign of how woman's housewife role was 'professionalized' in the 1950s as her trade, or career. The language of paid work transferred to unpaid work upheld the prevailing belief that women were equal but different from men.¹¹ In weekly magazines it was skills around consumption that were paramount to women's success in trade or career (Winship, 1981; Partington, 1989). Mary Grieve believed that:

The professional man's wife struggling to manage her money so that her children could get a better education was just as glad of the practical recipes, the well-designed clothes, the hints on value-for-money, as was the welder's wife who found that she too could benefit from that kind of service and information in her weekly magazine. Furnishing schemes and attitudes of mind which were hopelessly out of her reach and experience before the war were within her ken now. (Grieve, 1964:135)

As printing restrictions were lifted (1951) and supplies of goods filtered onto the domestic market (all rationing finally ended in 1954), the number of pages in the weeklies expanded and advertising blossomed into full-page colour. More

dispersed throughout an issue than clustering at front and back, advertising's design and aesthetic seemed to lead the way for editorial spreads, with which it also shared a similar ideological framework. White is critical of such advertising copy:

It was calculated to focus attention on their domestic role, reinforce home values, and perpetuate the belief that success as a woman, wife and mother, could be purchased for the price of a jar of cold cream, a bottle of cough syrup or a packet of instant cake-mix. (White, 1970:158)

But, like successful advertising at any historical moment, it encapsulated values that were appealing to potential female consumers. After the drabness of war and austerity the possibility of once again buying, and in plenty, promised the selfish pleasures so long denied in the cause of nationhood (Winship, 1984). For women, the assumption was that 'normal' housekeeping could be resumed after years of disruption, and the availability of goods contributed towards making that an attractive proposition.

The weeklies educated working-class women to choose and spend wisely, 'to help people towards their best use of rising standards' as Mary Grieve put it (1964:139). Proper engagement in consumption work, on the person and on the domestic front, was held out as a source of pleasure and of success, and feminine desire and identity were bound by those parameters, what elsewhere I have described as 'that oppressive nexus of femininity-desire-consumption' (Winship, 1987:161).

In a 'Spring Wedding Number—Everything here for happiness' (*Woman*, 2 March 1957), one bride, on her 'trousseau hunt', is reported as saying, I'll be coping with a full-time job as well as housework so I plumped for nylon: no trouble at all and such pretty things to choose from. My nightie's a dream'. But femininity could also be undone by inappropriate consumption, as the magazine warns: 'With so many lovely things in the shops, trousseau-hunting can be a dangerous pastime'. And in the same issue of *Woman*: 'Elegant women the world over know the importance of the *Underneath* Look. They know that the prettiest dresses, the loveliest gowns are made or marred by what is worn beneath' (advertisement for Bear Brand 'loveliest of nylons'). An editorial item in another issue—'Edith Blair Tests and Tells'—featured the 'Bra Apron':

Frilled plastic apron that does an excellent 'cover-up' job, is boned so that its bib top stays up without the need for a tie. This means that party cooks stay unspattered and tidy in an apron that's whipped off in seconds as the guests arrive. (*Woman*, 5 January 1957)

Retrospectively it is doubtful there were takers for this one: the bra apron is risible, too close a relation to the kinkier merchandise in (later) sex shops. This item is useful nevertheless in raising the issue of readers' relation to the

magazine text. For it is one thing to describe the construction of femininity in magazines, another to suggest that readers identified with or behaved in the ways advocated. In *The designer housewife in the 1950s* Angela Partington argues that women withstood the ideological messages beamed in their direction by magazines and—her particular interest—by design professionals:

Women's consumption of designed objects in the fifties was profoundly equivocal. 'New ideas' in design, which usually embodied Functionalist principles, were well represented in women's magazines...But very often the deployment of these ideas ran contrary to the ideals and principles they were supposed to represent. (1989:211)

Highlighting women's autonomy with respect to domestic design concurs with wider theoretical attention focusing on readers' active appropriations of media texts (e.g., Morley 1980, Radway 1984, Ang 1985, Fiske 1987, Gray 1987). Such studies reject the concept of ideology where it might be inferring that subjects are its passive dupes. Along these lines Elizabeth Frazer, writing about 'Teenage girls reading *Jackie*' proposes, first, that we dispute there is

one valid and unitary meaning of a text. Second, we may care to check whether, even if we grant there is one meaning it does have...an ideological effect on the reader. (1987:411)

Her own study suggests that:

the kinds of meanings which are encoded in texts and which we might want to call ideological, fail to get a grip on readers in the way the notion of ideology generally suggests. Ideology is undercut, that is, by these readers' reflexivity and reflectiveness. (419)

Frazer introduces the concept of 'discourse register' to help conceptualize the means by which readers may be reflexive in their relation to a text. She defines discourse register 'as an institutionalised, situationally specific, culturally familiar, public way of talking' (420). Thus a reader commenting on a text may, so to speak, switch hats in terms of the discourse register she is deploying: from 'literary criticism' to 'feminism' to 'tabloid press' in the case of the teenage girls reading *Jackie*. Such switches, which are dependent on the topic and forum of discussion, most significantly involve a change of ideological premises and hence of what can and cannot be said. ('Discourse registers both *constrain* what is sayable in any context and *enable* saying', 421.) Frazer illustrates that within a 'feminist' register a group discussion around the double standard of sexuality between girls and boys is initiated: