BRIDGING MEDIA-SPECIFIC APPROACHES
The value of feminist television criticism's synthetic approach

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Introduction

Feminist study of media encompasses a variety of media forms, each of which possesses a distinct set of issues determined by the medium and how it is used, as well as by the variant theoretical and methodological traditions through which scholars have studied the medium. US feminist film and television criticism have maintained distinct methodological and theoretical emphases—yet the two areas of study are closely related. For example, feminist television studies developed from a synthesis of theoretical and methodological work in a range of fields, including feminist film criticism and theory, and remains at once connected to and distinct from feminist approaches to studying film. The commercial dominance of the US television system required that feminist television critics explore the "popular" to a degree less evident in US feminist film criticism, although feminist film critics have examined mainstream film texts with tools similar to those used by feminist television critics in other national contexts (Joanne Hollows 2000; Jacinda Read 2000; Yvonne Tasker 1993, 1998).

Understanding the relationship between varied areas of feminist media scholarship—their necessary divergences and their commonalities—aids in developing increasingly sophisticated theory and in responding to technological, socio-cultural, and theoretical changes. The transition to digital formats and hybrid delivery systems has begun to alter traditions of both "film" and "television," while postfeminist approaches have reinvigorated feminist media debates. Additionally, new media have established a place in popular use and academic criticism. This context makes it more crucial than ever to address the reasons for medium-specific feminist approaches as well as to consider what can be gained through shared conversations.

This article traces the development of feminist television criticism as a dynamic and independent area of study and argues that its theoretical complexity can be traced to the incorporation of multiple intellectual influences including feminist film criticism, British cultural studies, and feminist-inflected mass communication research. The approaches and methods central to feminist television criticism illuminate factors related to the theorization of institutions and industry, neither of which has occupied a persistently central place in US feminist film studies. We consequently conclude the article by considering what the theory and method of feminist television criticism might offer the area of feminist film studies. The preeminent importance that US television and mainstream Hollywood place on commercial viability makes the tools of feminist criticism,

particularly its analysis of institutional contexts and processes, useful for exploring mainstream US films. The essay centers upon the US context; however, theoretical exchange with British and Australian feminists has been particularly crucial, consequently taking the history beyond national boundaries despite this focus.

The Origins of Feminist Television Criticism

Feminist television critics have occupied a central role within television criticism nearly from its origin. The critical study of film possesses a longer history and consequently was moderately developed by the time feminists began finding space to assert their voices as various national cultures began attending to gender inequity in the 1970s (Francesco Casetti 1999). Feminist criticism and television studies were born together in that decade, and while both struggled for a place in academic institutions, the youthfulness of television studies made it possible for feminist voices to emerge without having to overthrow an "old guard." Feminist approaches and topics were well represented and even the area of focus in many of the earliest anthologies of television criticism (Helen Baehr & Gillian Dyer 1987; Mary Ellen Brown 1990; James Curran & Michael Gurevitch 1991; E. Ann Kaplan 1983; Patricia Mellencamp 1990; Lynn Spigel & Denise Mann 1992).

Feminist voices are consequently inseparable from the body of critical television studies as it now exists. As Horace Newcomb (2000, p. 5) acknowledges in his introductory essay to the sixth edition of *Television: The Critical View*, "feminist theories have been among the most active and perceptive in the study of television, and all theoretical positions must take note of these approaches to the medium." By the mid-1980s, a distinctive area of feminist television criticism, forged from feminist film theory, British cultural studies, and communication studies, became identifiable through theoretical approach, methodology, and critical assumptions.

Contributions of Feminist Film Theory

Any attempt to trace the contribution that feminist film theory has made to media studies in general and television studies more specifically will fall short, given the immensity of these fields of research. Certain thematic developments in the field of feminist film studies have left a clear imprint. In our brief examination of the role that feminist film theory has played in feminist television studies, we highlight two key interrelated themes: (i) its analysis of and tools for examining film texts in relation to sexual difference and spectatorship and (ii) its exploration of gender and genre. Particularly, feminist film theory has provided sophisticated understandings of texts and theories and methods for exploring narratives.

Film studies began to emerge as an academic field in the USA in the 1970s, although a significant body of theory predates this institutionalization. Concurrent with the increasing visibility of liberal feminism as a social movement, approaches labeled and understood as feminist developed in the shadow of film studies' increasing institutional presence. Lingering social activism of the 1960s contributed to an intellectual environment curious about viewing film as a site of political resistance to both capitalist and patriarchal ideologies, in addition to more traditional aesthetic examinations of film. Results of visible feminist activism, such as the creation of women's studies centers, provided an additional space in which feminist film scholars refined their work. Such scholars also developed their

ideas through exchanges with filmmakers, festival attendees, newspaper film critics, and feminist political and social activists, initially situating their work outside of traditional academic settings (Annette Kuhn 1982; B. Ruby Rich 1998).

In a broader context, after a period of decline in popular film attendance, Holly-wood produced a cycle of films focused on men and male violence and industrial logics shifted to emphasize the "Blockbuster" film. The climate consequently was ripe for feminist cultural criticism: early 1970s' feminist film critics began to analyze the images of women (or lack thereof) that film offered, and their criticism focused on the stereotypical roles Hollywood presented. For example, both Molly Haskell (1973) and Marjorie Rosen (1973) addressed popular representations of women in film, relying on a blend of anecdotal evidence and socio-historical contextualization to discuss why they thought women faired poorly in cinema.

While US critics during the 1970s addressed issues of perceived realism in relation to women and how film represented them—what Suzanna Danuta Walters (1995, p. 32) calls an "images" approach—British scholars began to debunk the very concept of realism. For example, Diane Waldman (1978) argued that attempts to determine whether or not a female character in a film was "realistic" or not was politically suspect: what woman, exactly, epitomizes a real woman, and does the creation of "positive images" constitute political or social change? Waldman also argued that feminist scholars should be examin-ing issues of ownership and access within the film industry to more fully understand what film could offer women in the pursuit of social change; however, this area of analysis was largely confined to discussions of feminist *avant-garde* and documentary. Thus, British scholars from the mid-1970s to early 1980s led the way in focusing attention on the complexities of spectatorship in relation to identification with characters and narratives and to a lesser degree on the mechanisms of the mainstream film industry (Helen Fehervary, Claudia Lenssen & Judith Mayne 1981–82; Barbara Halpern Martineau 1981; O. A. Rimoldi 1984). Beginning in the mid-1970s, the work of feminist theorists began to emphasize understanding how popular films' structures and strategies of narration guided spectatorship in gendered terms.[1] These scholars theorized that mainstream films con-structed and in turn relied upon gender as a term of difference, wherein "woman" became the Other to man, both in the film's diegesis and in the theater-goer's viewing world.

This commitment to theorizing film viewers' relationship with film came to domi-nate feminist film criticism throughout the 1980s. Psychoanalytic theory's ability to explain viewing dynamics in gendered terms politically invigorated feminism. The 1980s provided a decade of rich debate, with feminist scholars immersing themselves in the theoretical underpinnings of psychoanalysis, semiotics, and structuralism. Laura Mulvey's landmark essay in 1975, and the responses to her ideas about the patriarchal visual pleasures of Hollywood cinema, provided a particular focus.[2] Tania Modleski (1988) turned a psychoanalytic lens on Alfred Hitchcock's films, while Kaja Silverman (1984) addressed the semiotics of sound, theoretically challenging the dominance of the male gaze. Mary Ann Doane (1982) explored the psychoanalytic concept of masquerade in an attempt to explain how females could participate in spectatorship with patriarchal films, while Janet Bergstrom (1979) turned to the concept of bisexuality to develop more flexible concep-tions of female spectatorship.

As the scope and flexibility of feminist psychoanalytic theory has expanded, scholars have continued to develop increasingly complex textual analyses in relation to female spectatorship. For example, Elizabeth Cowie's (1997) attention to historical context

and the structural complications of genre through a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens opened up new ways of theorizing viewing useful for feminist media studies. Other scholars, influenced by cultural studies, followed the route of exploring film history and industrial elements in their explorations of spectatorship (Christine Gledhill 1988; Kuhn 1985; Judith Mayne 1993). A growing body of work on stardom, exhibition, and publicity has also emerged, although this work has not dominated feminist film studies to the same degree as psychoanalysis.[3] In addition, a few feminist film scholars have considered the audience more directly (Jacqueline Bobo 1995; Elizabeth Ellsworth 1986; Gledhill 1988).

Another significant area of feminist film criticism relevant to feminist television studies is the extensive work conducted on gender and genre. Since the 1980s, feminist film scholars have produced work on film noir and horror that continually reconfigured understandings of gendered spectatorship (indeed, of gender itself) (Rhona Berenstein 1995; Carol Clover 1992; Doane 1991; Barry Keith Grant 1996; Kaplan 1978; Maureen Turim 1989). Work on "women's genres" (in particular melodrama) and "women's films" has more directly affected (and been affected by) feminist television studies.[4] The work of Annette Kuhn (1984) specifically addresses the intersections of feminist film and television approaches to studying "women's texts," stressing the importance of the context of viewing and textual analysis in both film and television when considering gender.

Feminist film theory contributed greatly to the development of feminist television criticism, certainly to a greater degree than we can express here. In spite of the scope of this area of scholarship, the most significant contributions of feminist film analysis for feminist television analysis are found in its attention to how the film text operates in gendered terms to construct spectatorship and its sophisticated methods for the analysis of texts. While this attention to the text has at times meant that historical context has been under theorized, this does not negate the value of textual analysis for either film or television studies.

Contributions of British Cultural Studies

Cultural studies, of course, encompasses many more foci and cultural artifacts than just media generally or television specifically; however, theorists who approached the study of media through the theoretical framework of British cultural studies contributed more to the hybrid area of feminist television criticism than any other group within cultural studies. Feminist-inflected research appeared relatively early on in cultural studies, although by no means was its emergence easy or immediately accepted. Charlotte Brunsdon (1996) recalls hostility toward feminist research and the perception that feminist work was derailing cultural studies, but the tenacity of Brunsdon and her peers forced an accommodation of feminist scholarship despite initial antagonism (see Morag Shiach 1999; Sue Thornham 2000).

Brunsdon (1996, p. 279) notes a first phase of Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) scholars at the University of Birmingham incorporating feminism spanning 1973–1981, but the work best known as characteristic of British cultural studies' feminist scholarship emerges following this phase (Women's Studies Group CCCS 1978; see Angela McRobbie & Tricia McCabe 1981). The feminist television scholarship from British cultural studies that has most greatly influenced the formation of a distinct feminist television criticism can be organized into two areas, audience research and studies of soap operas, but cultural studies' contribution obviously surpasses these narrow confines. The turn to

audience and reception initiated by British cultural studies greatly affected many who study media in various ways. Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley (1978) and Morley's (1980) work on *Nationwide* audiences provided some of the earliest indication of the value of cultural studies for understanding television and its use as a component of cultural practice. Theorization of audience members as active meaning makers was particularly important to the assumptions and interests of feminist scholars. Much of this work drew techniques and theories from anthropology, such as the use of ethnography, which also contributed to Janice Radway's (1984) research on romance novel reading.

Studying audiences developed as an emphasis for both practical and ideological reasons. Much of the work emerging in the 1980s focused on forms of television particularly enjoyed by women, which contributed to the pivotal place of the soap opera in this body of work. The denigration of women's cultural forms generally, and soap operas specifically, meant that discovering what audiences did with these texts had great value. Rather than affirming assumptions of the audience as passive, much of this research identified audience members' active construction of various pleasures, then sought to theorize this pleasure and deliberate media use with models of ideological transmission (Brown 1990). Brunsdon's (1981) and Dorothy Hobson's (1982) studies of *Crossroads* and research by Ien Ang (1989) on *Dallas* contributed to increasingly complicated understandings of women as audience members and of the textual forms they enjoy. The identification of specific pleasures provided by serial content and evidence of women's purposeful use of and engagement with soap operas contrasted assumptions that women were dupes or being indoctrinated by sexist ideology.

Christine Geraghty (1991) and many others continued expanding research on audiences and soaps through the 1990s, while others developed related work (Ang 1995; Brunsdon 2000; Purnima Mankekar 1999). Television has not been a central object of study for Angela McRobbie (1991, 1994), but she too struggled during the early years of British cultural studies to make a place for the study of gender, generation, and popular culture in work that applies to feminist television criticism. Additionally, rare audience work that truly merits the label ethnography resulted from Ann Gray's (1992) work on the activity of viewing and VCR use in the home and Marie Gillespie's (1993) study of south Asian immigrant television viewers in Britain.

It should be obvious that this work encompasses significant breadth, but the exploration of the intersection of texts with audiences has yielded the most salient contribution. Those who study media have debated whether scholars overemphasized the "turn to the audience" of the 1980s and 1990s at the expense of the study of institutions and overstated the possibility of resistance (see Marjorie Ferguson & Peter Golding 1997). These are broad questions related to the vitality and diversity of the field rather than a comment on the quality or value of the audience work produced during that time. Both the results of these audience studies and the methodological and theoretical perspectives they contributed are fundamental to feminist television criticism.

Contributions of Communication Studies

The work produced in the mid- through late 1970s indicates the initial foci and more narrow range of approaches of communication researchers who explored questions related to gender (commonly denoted as "sex roles") and the media. This research began with investigations of stereotypes and "representations" of women that commonly

employed content analysis (see Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels & James Benet 1978). Researchers generally under-theorized audiences and the activity of viewing, and as a result, believed viewers to possess little meaning-making power.

Early communication research also considered how institutional structures helped perpetuate certain images, emphasizing connections between content and women's lack of access to positions as creators and owners of media content and industries. Studies of employment opportunities and salaries dominated much of this work, as researchers sought to illustrate the limited access afforded to women and the lack of advancement and challenges they faced when they did secure a job (Matilda Butler & William Paisley 1980; Muriel Cantor 1978; Barbara Murray Eddings 1980). This work fit the liberal feminist agenda of creating professional job opportunities for women and also could be connected with research on representation and media socialization. In terms of the latter, an implicit, if not explicit suggestion asserted that images would not be as stereotypically containing if women held more creative and executive positions.

By the end of the 1980s, interest in and places to publish feminist-influenced media research began to spread within communication studies, emerging in two cycles. First, from the mid- to late 1970s, *Signs* (1975), *Women and Language* (1976), *Women's Studies in Communication* (1977), *Women's Studies International Quarterly* (1978), *Feminist Review* (1979), and *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* (1979) began publishing. No new journals appeared until the late 1980s, when *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* (1986), *Gender and Society* (1987), *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* (1988), *NWSA Journal* (1988), *Genders* (1988), and *Women: A Cultural Review* (1989) began publishing. The birth of *Feminist Media Studies* in 2001 marks the most recent development and provides the most focused outlet. As the body of work expanded, theories and approaches to the study of gender, communication, and media became more complicated and diverse.

The breadth of contemporary communication study makes a thorough catalog of this work impossible here; feminist media work can be organized into at least a half dozen areas of inquiry and analysis, some of which have little in common with others.[5] The original quantitative mass communication approach persists, but little conversation occurs between quantitative empirical studies and the more interpretive critical and cultural approaches we discuss below. Pre-professional subfields such as advertising and journalism also research gender issues, but critical frameworks are less common; much of the work in these areas retains foci such as stereotypes or employment figures as analytic emphases.

The distinction between cultural studies and communication studies can be at the same time as porous as cheesecloth and as impermeable as steel. Because of the breadth of approaches included within communication studies, it is difficult to speak of it as a coherent whole: the study of culture is crucial to some aspects and approaches, while wholly absent from others. British cultural studies' theorization of the audience had a considerable effect on some communication researchers, so that cultural studies' theory and methodology became central to the work of many trained and teaching within communication departments. The distinction between communication and cultural studies is often less clear in the case of feminist scholars researching in Europe and Australia, while the boundaries of subfield "divisions" demarcate US scholarship more clearly.

At least four approaches to feminist media inquiry or analysis remain within communication studies, and each incorporates or converses with cultural studies' theory

and method to varying degrees. The work of those who blend sociology and cultural studies, such as Sonia Livingstone (1989) and Andrea L. Press (1991), illustrates one approach to studying women television viewers. Political economy approaches to studying media in relation to gender are illustrated by the work of Eileen Meehan, whose career of institutional analysis of audiences and ownership provides a valuable and distinct component of feminist media research (Jackie Byars & Eileen R. Meehan 1994; Meehan 1990, 1993; Meehan & Byars 2000; Eileen Meehan & Ellen Riordan 2002). Political economy analyses have been less common in comparison with textual and audience studies; however, some recent publications suggest a new emphasis on institutional issues (Meehan & Riordan 2002). A third approach develops as scholars trained as rhetoricians bring their analytic method to the object of television. Bonnie J. Dow's 1996 book provides one of the most comprehensive illustrations of feminist rhetorical textual analysis, although scholarship by Sarah Projansky and Leah R. Vande Berg (2000) and Projansky (2001) provide additional illustrations. Theorizing by Celeste Condit (1989) and the critical response to her work by Dana Cloud (1997), who has also contributed her own rhetorical analysis of feminist or women-centered television texts, fit within this area as well (Cloud 1996). In this work, the influence of cultural studies appears in the authors' conceptualization of audiences (particularly in Condit's essay), however, the methodological emphasis on the text prevents much of this work from taking on the comprehensive character mandated by the cultural studies' call to consider the broad context of textual creation as well as the intersection of texts, institutions, and audiences.

Feminist Television Criticism: A Synthesis

The fourth approach transcends traditional communication studies, although many scholars employing this approach possess academic appointments within communication departments. Consequently, we identify it as an "area" of communication studies, but also acknowledge that its scope is broader than this positioning might suggest. The type of work we distinguish as characteristic of feminist television criticism (following the application by Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie d'Acci & Lynn Spigel 1997) is not uniform in its approach and can be located across a continua among film studies, British cultural studies, and communication studies. A primary characteristic of this work is its synthetic nature—its blending of diverse theoretical areas. (We chose synthetic as a derivation of synthesis, indicating the putting together of parts to form a new whole, not the use connoting artificiality.) The critical study of television (and feminist television studies specifically) exists at the margins of a variety of intellectual fields—illustrated by scholars' placement in diverse academic departments, attendance of a range of academic conferences, and publication in various journals, while lacking a central field, conference, or publication.[6]

The work of Ellen Seiter, Julie d'Acci, and Liesbet van Zoonen exemplifies the synthetic approach of feminist television criticism as it emerges after the blending of various theoretical and methodological contributions of feminism and media study. Seiter provides an example of the general feminist media scholar; her work spans audience, textual, and institutional criticism (Seiter 1986, 1993, 1999; Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner & Eva-Marie Warth 1989). In terms of a single publication, d'Acci's study of *Cagney and Lacey* (1994a) arguably enacts the most comprehensive example of a synthetic approach to the study of television. In addition to considering the triumvirate

of text, audience, and institution characteristic of the culturally contextualized British cultural studies approach, feminist film literature also informs d'Acci's study. van Zoonen's work (1991, 1994) blends the mass communication and cultural studies traditions (although it is clearly informed by feminist film perspectives as well), characteristic of European training and academic organization.

The majority of feminist television criticism primarily focuses on texts within a critical historical and cultural context.[7] Consequently, we do not argue that multiple sites of investigation (institutions, texts, audience) need to be investigated in a single work or across a personal spectrum of research to be understood as characteristic of the feminist television criticism approach. Rather, textual analysis can be conducted in such a way as to peripherally attend to or be cognizant of the historical and the institutional, and it is this broader awareness of the process of cultural construction and distribution that becomes characteristic of feminist television criticism.

The comprehensive nature of the work that has come to occupy an essential position within feminist television studies would have been impossible without the contribution of feminist film theory, British cultural studies, and communication studies. The sophisticated textual and narrative analysis strategies fundamental to feminist film criticism added crucial complexity to quantitative examinations in communication studies. At the same time, the applied work on audiences and more complicated theorization of reception developed by British cultural studies expanded the utility of ideas about spectatorship emerging from feminist film studies. The merging of various approaches for assessing the significance of institutional features within British cultural studies and communication studies produced valuable conversations and theory building. Communication studies' emphasis on popular texts as vehicles of mass media and British cultural studies' stress on everyday culture also converged in feminist television criticism in a highly productive manner. Attention to media forms engaged with by women or perceived as women's genres had a place in all of the approaches.

Such a synthetic approach is present in feminist film studies to a degree, but is more peripheral in terms of the larger body of feminist film criticism. The work of Ellsworth (1986) and Bobo (1995) continues to exemplify the scope of actual audience research and few analyses focusing on the role of industrial structures and imperatives from a feminist perspective have been produced. Notable exceptions here are Christine Gledhill's work (1991) on stardom and viewer identification, Lea Jacobs's historical study (1991) of censorship, women's images, and the industry in the 1930s, and the work of Christina Lane (2000) on feminist independent film directors who moved into Hollywood. More synthetic models can be found in the work of Patricia Mellencamp (1992), Janet Staiger (1992, 1995, 2000), Judith Mayne (1993), Yvonne Tasker (1993, 1998), and Jacinda Read (2000), in which cultural and historical context (including an awareness of economics, industrial structure, and political environments) emerge as critical theoretical frames of reference. We are not suggesting that feminist film theory incorporate feminist television criticism to become more synthetic, but that feminist television criticism provides an illustration of the utility of incorporating cultural studies perspectives in the feminist study of media. The synthetic approach used in feminist television criticism could yield more comprehensive understandings of US popular films in relation to their cultural context, including the commercial imperatives guiding their production.

Approaching Feminist Film Criticism Synthetically

In many ways film and television are very different media, constructed in incongruous industries and with notably divergent theoretical histories. Discrepancies particularly apparent to these television scholars include the theoretical tradition focusing on film as art and the existence of an independent or art sector in film that is less, if not entirely lacking in television due to its centralized and purely commercial distribution system.[8] It is not our intention to dispute the importance of the "film as art" approach to studying film or to suggest that feminist media studies should value independent productions more than Blockbuster studio products. Our intervention is a statement of "in addition to" rather than "in the place of." Although much of the historical materialist work retrospectively studying film and culture has incorporated a deep understanding of industrial conditions in assessing texts and their interactions with culture, studies of contemporary film have focused primarily upon texts, and in some cases on audience (Barbara Klinger 1994; Mayne 1993; Staiger 1992, 1995). Key contributions that the synthetic approach of feminist television studies might offer film include a model of how institutional analysis can be incorporated in textual work and the value of exploring texts and culture with attention to industrial factors.

For example, what might a film study comparable to d'Acci's examination of *Cagney and Lacey* illuminate? A single text study that included interviews with creative and executive workers, in addition to some observation of the shooting, editing, and business process might provide information of great depth about how and why certain images and stories are or are not present in mainstream Hollywood film. As d'Acci's case illustrated, a complex process of negotiation occurs in the making of commercial texts, and observation of conversations about everything from casting to promotion could yield rich data about the assumptions upon which many decisions that may seem creative in nature are made. Importantly, such work would not require the constant presence of the researcher. Much can be learned in a few days on set and the relationships established during even short visits are exceptionally valuable. Not all must be observed first-hand, but conversations and interviews with various individuals involved in the production process can yield vast data.[9]

d'Acci's work provides an example of the study of an individual case; however, there are many other levels of analysis at which the examination of institutional factors could illuminate feminist understandings of film. The case study might indicate the complexity of the process and the negotiation involved, particularly for films with substantial rewriting or elements that change as a result of focus group testing. Studies might focus on individual agents, an approach already developed by some as a result of the tradition of auteur study. Such studies need not be limited to directors; in considering mainstream film it is important not to underestimate the role of studio executives (such as Harvey Weinstein) who contribute significantly to the content produced, its form, and its success in reaching broad audiences. Additionally, studies of particular organizations, such as studios (Miramax), and the coherence or incoherence of features that connect with gender dynamics could be illuminating. A number of female film stars have created their own production companies, which have in some cases produced films unlikely to draw the attention of major studios. Such studies might explore the contribution of Drew Barrymore's Flower Films, or how particularly bankable stars use the star cache gained from Blockbuster studio work to enable or draw attention to films less likely to dominate

the multiplex. Exploring the institutional components that contribute to a certain cycle of films or story trends could provide greater understanding of the significant role institutional structures and business practices play in the creation of films, the negotiation of their content, and the success of their distribution.

An Application: The Case of *Legally Blonde (2001)*

We chose the 2001 film *Legally Blonde* as a small case study in order to demonstrate the type of questions through which popular New Hollywood films can be analyzed. *Legally Blonde*'s popularity with viewers and critics, and its profitability, makes it an intriguing case study of how industry, text, and cultural context converge to deliver a film featuring an independent comic heroine. In the narrative, a young sorority girl (Elle Woods, played by Reese Witherspoon) follows her elitist boyfriend from California to Harvard Law School. He immediately leaves her for a more refined lifestyle—and a more refined girlfriend. Elle, however, is determined to win him back by proving that she is Harvard Law material. At first glance, this film's narrative might seem to offer much of what early feminist film criticism condemned about the representation of women in Hollywood. Elle conforms to conventional beauty standards and displays a traditional femininity, and the camera often lingers on her body to emphasize her clothing and demeanor. The story is set in motion because the heroine seeks to prove herself worthy of a more powerful man. In the process she has cat fights with "the other woman," replicating an oft-criticized tactic of narrative films depicting women as unable to work together. Exploring these narrative tactics within the historical and institutional context of New Hollywood, however, allows other elements to emerge as worthy of attention. For example, while a girl chasing a boy and fighting off other girls along the way is hardly new, the fact that Elle quickly dominates the narrative's forward movement is significant. The presence of an active female protagonist might situate *Legally Blonde* as a "woman's film," but what might this mean in New Hollywood? How does Elle's carefree, fashion-obsessed drive to empowerment relate to a culture in which many young women seem to feel that "serious feminism" has outlived its purpose? (She eventually decides she is more interested in her burgeoning law career than the boy, yet she never loses sight of the latest fashion trends). How does the film's presentation of gender, law, and women's financial independence relate to changes in society? What might audience research reveal about how female viewers perceive *Legally Blonde* in terms of feminism and femininity? What role does viewers' awareness of the status of women in law school or the legal profession play in how this film was received?

Analysis could certainly be constructed in such a way as to make the answers to such questions deterministic of meaning, but that is not what we are suggesting. Rather, a textual analysis might make claims about the film's significance to cultural understandings of women and "girl power," but in doing so, also explore the film in the context of its commercial success, in relation to other films that blend themes of female empowerment with rhetoric of consumption, or consider a cultural context some have labeled "postfeminist."

Research could also explore how the cultural text of *Legally Blonde* extends beyond the movie theater. Released on DVD in 2002, the film's very narrative could take on different meanings when viewed in the home. Is this film one that viewers buy and watch repeatedly? What might this have to do with viewer awareness of the 2003 sequel, or

awareness of Reese Witherspoon's rapid rise to relative power in Hollywood subsequent to this film's release? Do viewers now watch with any attention to Witherspoon's life as a working mother and as a wife who earns more than her also famous husband? What do the behind-the-scenes commentaries offer in terms of guiding reception of the film that might be different from what a reading of the film in the theater would suggest? Do viewers watch *Legally Blonde* at home because of, or in spite of Witherspoon's constant appearance on cable in films such as *Cruel Intentions*, or because of airings of similarly themed films such as *Clueless*? Do viewers visit the film's website? If so, how does its headline—"Believing in yourself never goes out of style"—reconfigure the experience of the film's storyline and visions of gender empowerment?

In addition to providing a context through which textual analysis of *Legally Blonde* might be framed, institutional analysis might expose other information. The film is an adaptation of a novel by Amanda Brown. Did she draft a screenplay as well? The writers credited for the film are Karen McCullah Lutz & Kirsten Smith, joined by the ampersand (as opposed to "and") that indicates a writing team. What were their deliberations? What were the contentious issues involved in the adaptation and the rewriting? (This line of questioning might yield a more valuable result on *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White, & Blonde* (2003), which credits Amanda Brown for the characters, Eve Ahlert & Dennis Drake and Kate Kondell for the story, and Kate Kondell for the screenplay). Were these issues related to the "feminist" themes of the film? Did they have to do with the agency afforded to the heroine? (All issues a feminist textual analysis might explore using the text as evidence). Was the director, Robert Luketic, involved with the project from the beginning? Were the rewrites at his request? Was Witherspoon the initial casting choice? What concerns did the director, the studio, and Witherspoon have about the casting?

Similar questions can be asked throughout the filmmaking process. What scenes were cut and why? Was there substantial studio interference in any aspect of the film? What discussions were held about the marketing plan for the film? Did the star express concern or displeasure over any aspect of the film's development or marketing plan? Did focus group testing lead the studio or director to alter the film in any way? Exploring what is often a process of negotiation behind-the-scenes of a mainstream studio film production provides information vital to many of the assertions made about a text. And the film must also be understood within a larger context. In this case, *Legally Blonde*'s success was significant in expanding Witherspoon's star power, and it yielded an unplanned sequel in which Witherspoon holds a producer credit. What was the significance of this film for MGM? At what point did MGM choose to pursue a sequel? Obviously analysis only begins with the asking of these questions. The individual answers alone have little significance but contribute potential pieces toward a broader understanding of the intersection of the commercial, the artistic, and the cultural in relation to the feminist.

Conclusion

As Janet Staiger (2000, pp. 52–53) notes, the site and social context of viewing a film affects how it is read, and viewers do not necessarily contain their interaction with a film to the actual moment of viewing. Janet Wasko (1994, p. 4) points out that "films are seen today in many places other than theaters: most often in people's homes." Thus, feminist television scholars' attention to the dynamics of home viewing could be of great benefit to feminist film scholars' efforts to account for changes in viewing context. The

fact that people increasingly watch films in their homes on cable, in syndicated format, and on VCR and/or DVD (with all of DVD's attendant behind-the-scenes information, bonus footage, etc.) demands that feminist film critics reconsider how viewers experience and understand narrative films. In addition, film viewing increasingly encompasses an awareness of a variety of other texts—particularly television texts. Viewers often need to know and understand the history of television shows to read a given film (and vice versa), particularly as related to Hollywood's propensity to cross-market texts and stars and to mine television for its own ends. Recently these trends have resulted in popular film texts with particular ramifications for feminist film theory's analysis of how film narratives and specific genres construct gender, raising intriguing questions for analysis. For example, what new understandings of the construction of femininity in film can be achieved by examining the 2002 film version of the 1970s television cartoon *Scooby Doo*? How would exploring the narrative continuation of the 2002 film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* in the 2003 television series *My Big Fat Greek Life* enhance assessments of the film's discourse on ethnicity and gender? How does the narrative continuation alter the original film narrative? How does transferring the text into the home viewing context change viewers' relationship with the text? How can we understand gender and genre by exploring the industrial features that allowed *Charlie's Angels* to be reborn in its various manifestations? Do we need to revisit analyses of James Bond films in light of the fact that audiences may now know "the Bond Girl" because of cosmetic advertising campaigns, television replays of the films, and/or cable networks' examinations of the Bond Girl phenomenon? How have conceptualizations of teen female adolescence in film been reconfigured by constant showings of John Hughes's films on TBS and TNT?

These are only a few of the questions and new lines of research that might benefit from application of theories and methods common in feminist television criticism to feminist examinations of popular film. Perhaps more to the point, however, is that feminist television studies' history demonstrates the rich understandings that can emerge when a field of research draws upon a variety of theoretical and methodological lineages—such as feminist film studies, cultural studies, and feminist communication studies. Change remains constant for both film and television as art forms and industries, as well as for feminism as a theoretical and activist endeavor. With this flux in mind, we highlight the importance of methodological plurality. Examining mainstream films through varied theoretical and methodological lenses can expand understandings about the intersections of gender, feminism, culture, and commerce. Studies exploring the industrial context of Hollywood and other filmmaking centers are particularly important for the development of feminist understandings, and are currently underutilized as feminist approaches to the study of film. Expanding the role of studies either centering or peripherally addressing the relevance of institutional structure and industrial practice will serve feminist film criticism well as its objects of study and its theories continue to change.

NOTES

1.   See essays in Constance Penley (1988).
2.   During this decade the following journals offered special issues devoted to feminism and film: *Millennium Film Journal*, *Wide Angle*, *Screen*, *Film Reader*, *Jump Cut*, and *Journal of Film and Video*. *Camera Obscura*, an academic journal devoted to feminism and film theory, began publishing in 1977 and its editorial board was comprised of feminist scholars schooled in psychoanalysis and semiotics.
3.   See Jane Clarke and Diana Simmonds (1980); Waldman (1984); *Wide Angle*, vol. 6, no. 4 (1985); Florence Jacobowitz (1986); *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* (1989); Jane M. Gaines and Charlotte Cornelia Herzog (1990); Gledhill (1991); and Jackie Stacey (1994).
4.   See Kaplan (1983, 1991); Doane (1984, 1987); Gledhill (1987); Linda Williams (1984, 1988); Turim (1989); see essays in Patricia Erens (1990); Jackie Byars (1991); Karen Hollinger (1998); and Tasker (1998).
5.   See H. Leslie Steeves (1987) for a comprehensive overview of feminist approaches to communication studies.
6.   The recently irregularly held Console-ing Passions conference served this purpose to some extent, and the new journal *Feminist Media Studies* may rectify the lack of a primary journal.
7.   See essays in Helen Baehr (1980); Lauren Rabinovitz (1989); Lynn Spigel (1992); Mimi White (1992); d'Acci (1994b); Jane Feuer (1995); Kathleen Rowe (1995); Helen Baehr and Ann Gray (1996); Brunsdon, d'Acci and Spigel (1997); Brunsdon (1997, 2000); and Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz (1999).
8.   The more absolute version of this last statement is truer of the USA, which lacks a well-developed and used public system. Countries with a stronger history of public broadcasting might be able to provide more of a television equivalent of the independent or art film scene.
9.   Christina Lane's (2000) work moves in this direction. As her introduction indicates, Lane's work takes certain directors as its focus, but is removed from traditional auteur studies in significant ways. Lea Jacobs' (1991) historical research illustrating how regulatory and studio negotiations yielded a certain type of female character offers application to the present context where negotiations between artistic and commercial concerns might also yield a clear textual consequence.

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