STUDIES IN ENTERTAINMENT

Critical Approaches to Mass Culture

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WOMAN IS AN ISLAND

FEMININITY AND COLONIZATION

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Capitalism is the first mode of economy with the weapon of propaganda, a mode which tends to engulf the entire globe and stamp out all other economies, tolerating no rival at its side. Yet at the same time it is also the first mode of economy which is unable to exist by itself, which needs other economic systems as a medium and a soil. . . . The existence and development of capitalism requires an environment of non-capitalistic forms of production.

—Rosa Luxemburg

The petit-bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the Other. . . . But there is a figure for emergencies—Exoticism.

—Roland Barthes

The concept of "mass culture" implies a difference: between "mass" culture and some other kind of culture. Just what this other culture is does not have to be defined, for the mere suggestion of an alternative allows us the illusion that our participation in mass culture is more or less voluntary. To study a culture presupposes to some extent that one is outside it, though it is fashionable to "slum it" culturally, rather as George Orwell did physically, among the masses. It is extraordinary but true that a recent proud admission among some left-wing academics was to have cried at ET. There is a perverse contradiction whereby the higher up the educational scale you are, the more fun
is to be had from consuming (while criticizing) the artifacts of mass culture: camping on the other side of the field.

Two kinds of difference are necessary for meaning. One is the difference between terms. A word derives its meaning, according to Saussure, from being what all other words are not.3 "Cat" is not "dog" or "horse"; "nature" is not "culture"; "mass culture" is not "academic culture." The other difference is that which exists between the term or sign and its referent: the word "cat" is not a cat, or it could not stand for cat, while the cat itself does not necessarily mean a cat, but could stand for something quite different, like good luck or witches. "Nature," the concept, has a meaning precisely because it is a cultural construct and is not undifferentiated nature, which must include everything in the world. And the referent of the term "mass culture" is not the artifacts themselves, the TV programs and so on, but the people who watch them, "the masses": people who must, to us in the academic world, appear as the "other" or we would not have an object of study but a subject of study—ourselves.

Looking beyond the differences which define the edges of "mass culture," we find a need for new terms, or possibly for old terms, of which I think the concept of ideology the most useful. We may feel we are free to slip in and out of "mass culture" in the form of movies, TV magazines, or pulp fiction, but nowadays we know better than to imagine we can exist outside ideology. The concept of ideology also brings with it, from Marxism, suggestions about power and function and class. Speaking broadly, the whole point about most of the ideologies manifested in mass cultural "texts" is that they are dominant or hegemonic ideologies, and are therefore likely to be intimately connected with that very class which is furthest from "the masses." The function of most ideologies is to contain difference or antagonism, and the most effective way to do this, as Laclau has pointed out in his discussion of populism, is to set up difference.4 He argues that a populist ideology operates by creating a simple dualism between dominant and dominated groups, who then become defined purely by their mutual "difference" rather than by actual differences.

Living in liberal democracies, we are accustomed to "difference" appearing as a form of validation—whether in the form of "balance," as we are shown opposing points of view in controversial TV programs, or in the form of "choice," as we are able to choose between different brands of cornflakes when shopping. The whole drive of our society is toward displaying as much difference as possible within it while eliminating where at all possible what is different from it: the supreme trick of bourgeois ideology is to be able to produce its opposite out of its own hat. And those differences represented within, which our culture so liberally offers, are to a great extent reconstruc-

tions of captured external differences. Our culture, deeply rooted in imperialism, needs to destroy genuine difference, to capture what is beyond its reach; at the same time, it needs constructs of difference in order to signify itself at all. What I intend to focus on is not just the representation of difference and otherness within mass culture, but on the main vehicle for this representation: "Woman."

Psychoanalysis has examined the social construction of sexual difference, and psychoanalytic writers from Freud on have been careful to stress the distinction between the actual physical difference between the sexes and the psychical differences, which, although cultural rather than innate, can appear to be natural because they are "carried" by the biological difference: He Shave. Me Immac. But it is possible to go one step further, and, without taking "masculinity" and "femininity" as natural or given, to investigate the wider social meanings carried by these terms. Sexual difference, itself apparently natural, is used within ideology to "carry" other important differences, including that between "nature" and "culture." Psychoanalysis has focused on the signifiers of femininity. Yet the chain of signification never ends: femininity itself becomes a signifier of other meanings, many of them contradictory. I am going to consider not the psychoanalytic construction of sexual difference but the "differences" and expression of "otherness" that sexual difference carries in our particular Western bourgeois culture. Levi-Strauss shows how, in other cultures, natural systems of difference—those of plant and animal species, for example—are used to bear the significance of social differences and to organize the meanings of social structures.5 A similar process works in our own culture. The "natural," or in this case the already "naturalized," is precisely what carries off the social meanings. Just as Freud said of a neurosis that there is nothing it likes better than a nice solid reality to hide behind, so with social mythologies, the more "real" the structures to which they are attached, the more tenacious they are.

In our society women stand for the side of life that seems to be outside history—for personal relationships, love and sex—so that these aspects of life actually seem to become "women's areas." But they are also, broadly speaking, the arena of "mass culture." Much of mass culture takes place, or is consumed, in the "feminine" spheres of leisure, family or personal life, and the home; and it also focuses on these as the subject matter of its representations. The ideological point about these areas, the domain of both the "feminine" and "mass culture," is that they function across class divisions. If ideology is to represent differences while drawing attention away from social inequality and class struggle, what better than to emphasize differences which cut across class—the "eternal" sexual difference—or those
He shave. Me Immac.

Immac
The feminine way to remove unwanted hair.

How can new markets be opened up once the rest of the world has already been colonized? By creating new uses, new needs, new definitions; by finding new smells which require new deodorants, new kinds of stain which require biological attention, new and more functions, more divisions and subdivisions between products. If Immac is to distinguish itself, there must be more than one way of removing “unwanted hair”; and what better distinction to be made between functions, what more natural difference, than that of gender? Here we have “the feminine way to remove unwanted hair” differentiated from the masculine way, shaving, as naturally as male and female are distinguished in the jungle. The woman’s difference and need for a different hair-remover are evidenced in her being carried by the man. The gender divide, naturalized by its association with the “primitive,” itself carries the arbitrary division of functions that is necessary to make the product seem necessary. In this way, one of the most un-natural activities, the removing of body hair, is turned into a natural, indeed primeval, attribute of femininity.

*There is a further division of functions within the sphere of feminine hair removal, as Immac appears in “cream, lotion or aerosol form” and provides “a special Roll-On pack” for underarms.

which are bigger than class, like nationality? The most likely Other for a white working-class man, is either a woman (page 3 pin-ups are the central feature of the highest circulation paper in Britain) or a foreigner—in particular somebody black. It is not likely to be someone from the class which controls his livelihood. So one of the most important aspects of images of “femininity” in mass culture is not what they reveal, but what they conceal. If “woman” means home, love, and sex, what “woman” doesn’t mean, in general currency, is work, class, and politics. This is not to suggest that domestic, personal or sexual dimensions of life are not political: far from it. It is just that questions of class power frequently hide behind the omnipresent and indisputable gender difference, the individual fascination of which overrides political and social divisions we might prefer to forget (or say goodbye to, like Andre Gorz). In mass culture this phenomenon appeared in, for example, the Valentine’s Day headline of the Daily Mirror—“Mr. Britain, This is Your Wife”—with a series of mother and child photos that were successfully non-specific in terms of class, standing for a universal/national wife and motherhood. In academic circles the same syndrome is often equally apparent in the stress on sexual (rather than class) interpellation, in the concern with the construction of the (raceless, classless) gendered subject, and above all, in the current preoccupation with “desire.” Obviously these areas are important, yet the focus on them seems to have gone hand in hand with neglect of other issues. For example, speech and writing have as much to do with class as with “desire.” But sexuality and “desire” are special to us all, and herein lies their appeal as the “hot” topics of the moment. C’mon Cobnan’s, Light My Fire!

As soon as one stops talking about “masculinity” and “femininity” as timeless psychoanalytic universals and looks at the particular historical structures which have led up to our present culture, the idea of a sort of “pure” signification of difference evaporates, and we can see what differences are expressed by the m/f divide. We live today to a great extent in carefully divided spheres: work/leisure, public/private, political/domestic, economic life/emotional life, and so on. The political value of these divisions is manifest. If there is a strike (the sphere of work/politics), then “ordinary people,” “housewives,” “consumers” (those in the domestic/individual sphere) suffer. The fact that the same people literally straddle both spheres becomes forgotten, as, for example, when the miners are pictured holding the tax-payers to ransom, as if miners weren’t tax-payers themselves. But it is difference that makes meaning possible, and though in reality these spheres are not separate, it is their separation into sort of ideological pairs that gives them meaning. What “home” means to a working man is something opposite to work, though for a woman whose work-place
These two posters provide a perfect example of the division between male-work-social and female-leisure-natural. The ad for beer shows a man in a hard hat, obviously thirsty from work, consuming a pint of Harp lager. He is presented as culturally specific: it would be possible to guess his job within perhaps half a dozen guesses—construction worker, engineer, builder, oil worker: someone who works outdoors in a blue denim shirt. Firmly located in time and place, his clothes show that he could only be in the present; and he is fair-skinned, blond, obviously a white American or European.

The advertisement for Colman’s mustard on the left is the flip-side of the lager ad. Despite the fact that the woman in it appears to be eating a piece of Kentucky Fried Chicken, she herself is the feast that is offered. Her pose places her not as consumer, but as up for consumption; though her remark is addressed to the product, her body is addressed to the passing viewer. Sprawled on a tiger skin in front of an ornate but historically unplaceable fireplace, she is, like it, waiting to be lit, and a leopard is bringing her the mustard from back right of frame.

We are back to jungle imagery, the tiger and leopard suggesting a wildness and sexuality that are quite outside culture (even though they are awaiting a cultural product, the Colman’s mustard, to burst into flame). The woman is fairly dark and not easy to place either historically or geographically: she has a slightly Eastern appearance, but is impossible to locate in time. Although she is surrounded by cultural accoutrements, they are ones which signify wildness and exoticism, making them appear natural and connecting her sexuality and availability with the natural instincts of the beasts. Sexual difference is suggested in that her surroundings are far from “feminine”: it is unlikely that she killed the tiger whose skin she is lying on, and whoever did is presumably the masculine presence (or absence) which is required to light her fire. Femininity needs the “other” in order to function, even as it provides “otherness.”

A fire to be lit, and a fire to be put out: he needs the product with a drive that comes from his own masculinity, his activity at work; while she needs the product to bring alive her universal femininity, which is represented as passive and completely separate from the social world. He is a particular man; she is Woman, femininity, all women. But her placement with the wild beasts, outside culture, conversely places her culture, the culture of the Colman’s mustard, within nature. The social construct of female “sexuality” does not appear as class-specific; it offers each and every one of us a hot line back to the wild, an escape from the mundane problems of the present.
it is, it may not have the same meaning of “leisure.” One of the reasons mass culture is so little concerned with work or political movements is that most people turn on the TV to forget about these things. This obvious but important point is frequently overlooked by those of us whose work it is to observe and write about mass culture, as the function of these artifacts in daily life tends to be overshadowed by the process of detailed textual analysis. This rigid separation of work and leisure feels necessary because, since most of working life is so exploitative and much of social and political life so oppressive, people want to “get away from it all.”

Not only are activities divided: the drive to escape into personal life arises from the way that values are divided too, in equally schizophrenic fashion, so that all the things society claims to value in private and family life (caring, sharing, freedom, choice, personal development)—the kind of values that every tabloid runs its human warmth or heartbreak stories on—are regarded as entirely inappropriate in the sphere of political, social and economic life. Their lack there can be covered up, however, by locating these qualities in women and in the family, as cornerstones of our culture. Women, the guardians of “personal life,” become a kind of dumping ground for all the values society wants off its back but must be perceived to cherish: a function rather like a zoo, or nature reserve, whereby a culture can proudly proclaim its inclusion of precisely what it has excluded. It is as if Western capitalism can hold up an image of freedom and fulfillment and say, “look, our system offers this!” while in fact the reason these values are squeezed into personal life (and a tight squeeze it is, too) is that they are exactly what the economic system fundamentally negates, based as it is on the values of competition and profit, producing lack of control, lack of choice and alienation. In this sea of exploitation it does indeed appear that Woman Is an Island.

Thus, while we seem to have little choice over, for example, nuclear weapons, we tend to think of ourselves as having freedom or happiness inasmuch as these qualities are manifested in our personal lives, the part of life represented by femininity. And the sphere which is supposedly most different from the capitalist system is crucial to it, both economically and in producing its meanings. The family provides the most lucrative market for modern consumer economies; in Britain 80% of all shopping is done by women. The “natural” phenomena of the family and sexuality throw back an image of a “natural” economy, while the economy penetrates and indeed constructs these “natural” and “personal” areas through a mass of products—liberally offering us our own bodies as sites of difference: You Can Use Pond’s Cream and Cocoa Butter All Over. Here. Or There.

It is in consuming that we appear to have choice, and in personal

Woman and colony become completely confused here: Fiji is an island but has been appropriated as nothing but a perfume; while the wearer of perfume, Woman, has been turned into an island, generalized, non-specific, but reeking of exoticism. The feminine and the exotic are perfectly merged, as both are colonized by The French Quarter, which wraps its red, white and blue flag round the lot. (The picture is bordered in red, white and blue, the same colors as on the tie of the “Q” around the bottom left caption.) Woman is an island because she is mysterious, distant, a place to take a holiday; but she is also an island within ideology—surrounded and isolated, as the colony is by the colonizer, held intact as the “Other” within a sea of sameness. If Fidji can be wrapped up in the chic French scarf of femininity, femininity is equally enclosed, gift-wrapped within culture, not as one of its own products but as a package tour of the natural.
"Here, or There"—a hint of the sexual, of forbidden places: the photo shows us pretty much of "here," the skin that is visible; it is the "there" which is left to be imagined, the darkest and most secret place where Pond's Cocoa Butter might be used. The "all over" is dangerous and safe at the same time: it points to its extremity—even "there"!—and "there" is the other, the furthest place, the sexual; yet the gap between "here" and "there" is smoothed over in the democratic application of Pond's Cocoa Butter—it knows no difference.

*As Lacan says, the symbolic requires difference, which the imaginary tries to leap across."
relations that we appear to have freedom. As long as women are carrying those values individually, for society, they do not have to be put into operation socially. Women who protest "as women" against the bomb are either engaging in a very effective use of society's own values against itself or accepting society's ideological definition of themselves as inherently more caring. Whatever their uses, the values of interpersonal relations, feeling, and caring are loaded onto women in direct proportion to their off-loading from the realities of social and economic activity.

This can be seen in everyday terms, as the "personal life" that is set up in opposition to work becomes the justification for work: men (as if only men go out to work) are exhorted to work harder, so as to earn more, so as to insure their home and family, invest for their children, enhance their leisure time, buy more exciting holidays, etc. The daily grind appears meaningful only because of the life outside it. The social structure is justified not in social but in personal and individual terms. This shows how separation and difference, the opposition between terms, produce meaning not just in theory but in day-to-day life. Similarly, the idea of "woman" and the "personal" as a repository for the values society wants to be rid of can be seen literally in current social policies in Britain—policies which have deliberately replaced social services for the handicapped and elderly with the explicit assumption that women will perform these services individually, unpaid, in the home. The government then seems to be the champion of the individual, the home, and family—which is exactly where it is dumping its unwanted burden! This illustrates in practice the separation of sign and referent: the "return to the family" stands for something quite different from the hardship, disguised as responsibility, which is in fact being "returned" to real families.

If this kind of "concrete semiotics" seems a little far-fetched, one might ask what other kind of semiotics could possibly be of any use politically? I see a Marxist semiotics as an enterprise that tries to understand both a structure and its content—concerned with a system of meaning, but one whose meanings function within actual historical systems. The need of our society both to engulf Others and to exploit "otherness" is not only a structural and ideological phenomenon; it has been at the root of the very development of capitalism, founded as it is on the imperialist relations described by Rosa Luxembourg in the quotation above. If woman is the great Other in the psychology of patriarchal capitalist culture, the Other on which that culture has depended for its very existence is the colony, which, as Luxembourg shows, it needed simultaneously to exploit and to destroy. Capitalism is not a system which can function alone in equilibrium. It always

Here Pond's Cream and Cocoa Butter is less coy about unveiling its tropical mystery: "For centuries, the women of the South Sea Islands have been envied for their soft skin." The Other is pictured less ambiguously, and its capture proclaimed more triumphantly. In showing an actual (albeit very "white"-looking) South Seas woman the control of difference is more complete, and we are placed not between two worlds, but in control of both: "Now your skin can have the best of both worlds." The product has brought the Other together with the known, and the timeless into modernity. "For centuries" and "for generations" the secret has been kept but now the "traditional South Seas recipe" is combined with "modern, well-tried moisturizers." In this way the tradition of a different culture appears as the modern achievement of our own.
needs some imbalance, something other than itself: riddled with contradictions, it is not internally sufficient. Our current standard of living derives in part from the incredibly cheap labor exploited by multinational companies in “developing countries,” which produce many of our consumer goods on wages that would be unacceptable to us, and from the control of markets internationally. Western banks make enormous loans, at enormous interest, to impoverished Eastern Bloc countries. Economically, we need the Other, even as politically we seek to eliminate it.

So, with colonial economies as with the family, capitalism feeds on different value systems and takes control of them, while nourishing their symbolic differences from itself. The “natural” and “exotic,” the mystery of foreign places and people, appear both as separate from our own culture and as its most exciting product: Discover The Tropical Secret For Softer Skin. Travel and holiday advertising offers us the rest of the world in commodity form, always represented as completely different from the fast pace of Western “culture,” yet apparently easily packaged by it nonetheless. Rather as, in individual psychology, the repressed, instead of disappearing, is represented or replaced by a symptom or dream image, so in global terms different systems of production (colonial, feudal) which are suppressed by capitalism are then incorporated into its imagery and ideological values: as “otherness,” old-fashioned, charming, exotic, natural, primitive, universal.

What is taken away in reality, then, is re-presented in image and ideology so that it stands for itself after it has actually ceased to exist. The travel images of “colorful customs,” of exotic cultures, of people apparently more “natural” than ourselves but at the same time expressing our own “naturalness” for us—all these images of “otherness” have as their referent an actual Otherness which was and is still being systematically destroyed, first by European then by American capital. Yet it is the idea of “natural” and “basic” cultures which seems to guarantee the permanence (and, ironically, the universality) of capitalist culture. It is the value system of our own society that we “read off” other societies; we seek to naturalize our own power structures in the mirror of “natural” life as pictured outside capitalism. Other societies can be used in the same way that the family is used to show work without revealing class; little wonder that, for example, car advertising selects so many images of women and peasants, since their labor can be presented as “natural” and autonomous. But just as the commodity which expresses another’s value loses its own identity in the process, so those “primitives”—women and foreigners—who are so valuable in reflecting capitalism’s view of itself are robbed of their own meanings and speech, indeed are reduced to the function of

This woman-in-sea-with-garland image is the typical representation of the exotic; conversely, femininity is represented by the “woman of the islands”: half-naked, dark-haired, tanned. Yet her features make her equally likely to be a white American or European woman who has acquired the “natural tan of the islands.” It is striking that the deep-tan advertising genre, and the exotic “southern” images, never use either African-looking models or politically contentious places; in this ad “the islands” are obviously Hawaii, but in general there are many imaginary “islands” in make-up, suntan, and perfume ads which serve to represent an “other” place and culture without actually having to recognize any real other country and its culture. The “desert island” is the ideal location for the “other”; it is more easily colonized than an entire continent, and picturing the colony as female makes it so much more conquerable and receptive.

Of course, when the caption offers its product “to all skin types for a safe, dark, natural tan” it doesn’t really mean a “natural tan.” If one were naturally dark, of course, one would be black—a contingency not anticipated by the ad, which clearly does not address “all skin types” but, like almost all public imagery, assumes its audience to be white.

*The early capitalist pioneer Robinson Crusoe did well in this respect.
Fashion is the area of social communication where the function of difference is perhaps most vividly seen. A débutante could go to a party in a pair of overalls and be regarded as highly fashionable; a plumber could not. It is currently "in" for the young and well-fed to go around in torn rags, but not for tramps to do so. In other words, the appropriation of other people's dress is fashionable provided it is perfectly clear that you are, in fact, different from whoever would normally wear such clothes.* Fashion photographers are very fond of re-placing models in the original locations of the styles they wear: you see glamorous, leggy women posing in denim shirts in gas stations, pouting women in boiler-suits and cloth caps perched on factory equipment (both examples from actual fashion features in British magazines), or women in khaki draped across camels or Land Rovers in deserts—the colonial safari look.

In these concoctions from Chelsea Girl, the borrowing of the exotic is very much in evidence. Yet the clothes manage to suggest both colonized and colonizer together with their mixture of sari-style wrap and military khaki—"safari dress," to quote the catalogue—blended with "punjabi trousers" and topped by a choice of army cap or turban. This proximity of army gear to the "exotic" is very revealing: the entire colonial relation can be expressed in one outfit. A recent fascination with the whole phenomenon of colonization has been seen in Britain with the popular, "high-class" TV drama, "The Jewel in the Crown"; and the nature and level of this interest are pretty much the same as the current fashion preoccupation. The meaning of British colonization in India is eclipsed as the two sides of a real conflict are rolled into one and come to stand for an "otherness" and "exoticism" that have no content, merely a style.

It is fine fashion to wear a turban if you are white, as these glossy photos show, even though in Britain sikhs who wear turbans for religious reasons are subject to much racist abuse. I once heard a girl with pink hair and two rings through her nose complaining about the way Indian women wear saris in this country—"It's not right for them to try and stay different once they come here, they should make an effort to fit in."

*A more general example of this, and of the importance of the relation clothes have to work, is the way that working class people tend to dress up to go out—if you have been wearing overalls or jeans all day you want to get out of them and demarcate your leisure time—while the "professional" middle class tends to dress down.
commodities. We are the culture that knows no “other,” and yet can offer myriad others, all of which seem to reflect, as if they were merely surfaces, our own supposed natural and universal qualities. To have something “different” captive in our midst reassures us of the liberality of our own system and provides a way of re-presenting real difference in tamed form: *Keep It Dark, Keep It Safe*. We do not like real Others but need to construct safe ones out of the relics of the Others we have destroyed—like the Stepford Wives, the perfect, robotically feminine wives manufactured by the men of Stepford from selected components of their original, human wives. The real women are killed in the process.

Capitalism’s constant search for new areas to colonize finds both an analogue and an expression in the processes of fashion: *Chelsea Girl Spring/Summer Collection 1984*. But by fashion I don’t merely mean clothes. The bourgeoisie always wants to be in disguise, and the customs and habits of the oppressed seem so much more fascinating than “his” own. How many of the London middle class really want to live in a traditionally middle class area like Kensington? How much more original to move eastwards, into “poorer” (and cheaper) areas, interesting converted warehouses, narrow Dickensian streets with ornate old pubs. But where do the inheritors of this working class landscape end up, once the imaginative middle classes have moved in and knocked through the front parlor walls? In enormous and desolate tower blocks, even farther east, while the leader of the Social Democratic Party enjoys a view of the docks and the flavor of the authentic in historic Limehouse. Why is this geographical survey relevant? Because it shows how characteristics of social difference are appropriated within our culture to provide the trappings of individual difference: *Isn’t it Nice to Be Brown When Everyone Else is White*. The bourgeoisie is obsessed with whatever it is that “he” hasn't got, whether a suntan or a sense of community. And while the former is buyable, the latter, despite the movements of the property market, is not. Yet it is a premise of capitalism that everything can be exchanged. Academics will sometimes exchange an investigation of their own “culture” for the more colorful and exotic field of other people’s, and in the intricacies of these mass cultural texts it becomes possible, literally, to lose oneself. As Marie-Antoinette played dairymaid, we sometimes play “popular culture,” in a way that is fashionable only because we feel, ultimately, that we can pull back and reassert our difference. It is crucially important to study “mass culture” and its specific texts, but not in order to understand “the masses”; the ideology of difference is not, in fact, different from the ideologies that imprison us all.

The fashion for tans shows most clearly of all the necessity of difference in producing meaning, and also reveals how the relation of ideological phenomena to production is frequently central to their meaning (despite the supposed outdated of this concept within contemporary Marxism). When the nature of most people’s productive work, outdoors, made a suntan the norm for working people, a pale skin was much prized, a mark of luxury: not just a symbol but an indexical sign of leisure time, a measure of distance from the masses’ way of life. Now, however, a deep suntan stands for exactly the same things—leisure, wealth, and distance—for it must involve not being at work for the majority of people, and therefore suggests having the wealth for both leisure and travel.

In fact, this ad for Ambre Solaire offers you self-tanning lotion which doesn’t require hours in the sun; however, the fake tan it produces only has a meaning because it does suggest time in the sun, leisure, etc. It is typical within ideology that the method of the product, the self-tanning, actually denies what it means, which is “real suntan”—making the inaccessible accessible, while simultaneously boasting that it is uniquely hard to obtain. In theory, anyone and everyone could buy fake-tan lotion and get a tan, yet the tan still represents difference, as the caption shows.

There is another kind of difference which this provocative caption completely ignores. “Isn’t it nice to be brown when everyone else is white?” Yes, but only if you were white to start with. The racism of a white colonial society isn’t very nice.
NOTES


4. Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 161: “A class is hegemonic not so much to the extent that it is able to impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society, but to the extent that it can articulate different visions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralized.”


7. In her article, “Woman as Sign,” in *m/f* no. 1 (1978), Elizabeth Cowie explores the place of women as bearers of meaning in societies from both a psychoanalytic and an anthropological point of view. However, in locating “woman” as a sign produced entirely through exchange, her argument becomes tautological, as women come to signify nothing but difference, and difference is signified simply through the fact that women are exchanged while men are not. “Woman is produced as a sign within exchange systems in as much as she is the signifier of a difference in relation to men, i.e., women are exchanged rather than men... The position of women as sign in exchange therefore has no relation to why women are exchanged, in other words, it has no relation to the ‘idea’ of women in society” (p. 56). This particular analysis, which is important in that it was one of the first to examine women not as signified but as sign, stops short at the formal production of the sign and never looks at what that sign means, the content of the signifying system. What woman the sign means, according to this account, is the concept “woman,” which in itself means simply exchangeability.


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7

THE INCORPORATION OF WOMEN

A COMPARISON OF NORTH AMERICAN AND MEXICAN POPULAR NARRATIVE

Jean Franco

There have probably never been so many techniques for telling stories as there are in this era of mass culture: cinema, television and radio soap opera, comic-strip novels, photonovels, print narrative, certain genres of popular song, and even advertisements. And, despite the obstinately high number of illiterates, there have never been so many readers and certainly never so many women readers. In the United States, about half of the paperback book market consists of mass market fiction (predominantly romance) for women. In Mexico, two popular series whose readers are mainly women sell between 800,000 and one million copies each week for each volume. Since every issue is probably read by more than one woman, these figures are significant indices of the “feminine,” at least as it is constructed in modern society.

The study of modern mass culture narrative for women raises several crucial questions:

- That the pluralism of mass-culture narrative (which ranges from conventional romances to “liberation” stories) does not produce “contradictions” suggests that there is no “dominant ideology” in the old sense but rather a process of constantly changing tactics and adaptations to circumstance. With respect to women, can it be said that this pluralism, together with the internationalization of mass culture, has constituted new kinds of feminine subjects that conflict with older national “femininities”?
- Since we are dealing with a transnational phenomenon, it may seem no longer to make sense to distinguish between U.S.-produced romances and Mexican photonovels, between Brazilian and U.S. tele-