

## International Conference, “Women and Popular Culture(s) in the Anglophone Worlds: 1945-2015”

Université de La Rochelle, May 4-5, 2017

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# International Conference, “Women and Popular Culture(s) in the Anglophone Worlds: 1945-2015”

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- 1 This first edition of the International Conference on “Women and Popular Culture(s) in the Anglophone Worlds” organized by Elodie Chazalon, under the aegis of the research unit CRHIA (Centre de Recherche en Histoire Internationale et Atlantique) at the University of La Rochelle, examined through popular culture whether women, over the past 70 years, have achieved equality and fairness of treatment, managed to invest sectors they were previously barred from, and invented specific spaces. The conference offered a wide panel of representations and of formats that expressed the need for a reassertion of feminist politics and fights.

## Kim Akass (University of Hertfordshire, UK), “Motherhood, Maternal Representation and Popular Culture”

- 2 In her paper, Kim Akass shows how, even at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women are linked to biology and reproduction, which is well exemplified in the three HBO series *Sex and the City*, *The Sopranos* and *Game of Thrones*. The latter has been criticized for its depiction of women, mainly used for their reproductive capacities even though they manage to gain power. But the fantasy world and medieval background it depicts can explain these archetypes. That is not the case for *The Sopranos*, whose setting is contemporary and in which mothering is a cause of discrimination against women. Women live in a patriarchal society where they are used as commodities and reproductive partners. By contrast, *Sex and the City* shows motherhood through the eyes

of women and nothing much has changed since it was first aired: women, when they have children, still have to face workplace discrimination and cultural pressure to stay at home. Strangely enough, it seems that the representation of womanhood has gone from a high point with *Sex and the City* to a low point with *Westworld*. Hence, until women are represented equally and fairly, womanhood will never escape the patriarchal institution of motherhood.

### **Rim Latrache (Université Paris 13, France), "The Representation of Arab/Muslim Women in American Popular Culture: Stereotypes and Reality"**

- 3 Rim Latrache explains how the immigration of Arab/Muslim people changed over time for geopolitical reasons, and also because the immigrants' gender, religious, and social backgrounds have changed. Most Arab/Muslim women lived in traditional families, but when they arrived in the USA, they were prepared to assume an active economic role. The representation of Arabs and Muslims in popular culture have long been stereotypical, but they changed with World War II, the American policy in the Middle East, and 9/11. The Arab/Muslim population has mainly been described as monolithic despite its diversity, and the Second World War and recent terrorist attacks have led to a backlash against them in the USA and to a shift in their representation – from a monolithically stereotypical exoticism to the no less stereotypical image of terrorism. Thus, prejudices still prevail although there were and have been independent and active Arab women in the USA.

### **Emma Heishman (Aix-Marseille Université, France), "She Ain't No Lady: Women and Blaxploitation"**

- 4 For a long time, Black women have been excluded from the movies, have been deprived of non-stereotypical roles, and so have been defined by others. In the 1970s, a new genre was born in the wake of the civil rights movement: Blaxploitation. It was independent, marketed for a Black audience with a low budget, and it rested on the overwhelming presence of black actors and actresses. However, in Blaxploitation films, the very stereotypes that were to be mocked were often unintentionally reinforced. Women were aware of the stereotypes they were embodying, but they did it all the same in order to fracture the white monopoly on the movie industry. And indeed, Blaxploitation women continue to influence popular culture (with directors such as Quentin Tarantino).

### **Corentin Fricard (Université de Limoges, France), "Unbinding Gender and Sexuality in Ryan Murphy's *Asylum*"**

- 5 Corentin Fricard demonstrates how Ryan Murphy, the creator and producer of the TV series *American Horror Story: Asylum*, gives his audience food for thought about current social issues. By addressing the 1960s, Murphy highlights the ostracism and violence women were and are still the victims of. What happens in the past to the non-normative

and extra-normative women in the show warns today's audience of the threat certain currently pending legislations would represent if they were to be passed. Although set in the past, the series thus shows how the same fights and discussions have to be repeated; it also presents different family models and norms. This show may be seen as a feminist tale encouraging women and queer families to fight for their rights.

## **Elisabeth Lechner (Universität Wien, Autriche), "Against the Silencing Politics or TMI or Creating Spaces for 'Disgusting' Female Bodies in Popular Culture"**

- 6 Elisabeth Lechner's presentation focuses on female artists who resist against the normativity imposed on female bodies, taking as a case study Lena Dunham. This artist (who is an actress, a writer, a producer, a director, and a feminist) tries to promote the visibility of "non-normative" female bodies, to make the entertainment industry more feminine and to promote feminist ideas through her works. However, she has also been criticized for the lack of racial diversity in *Girls*, the TV show she has written, and for its lack of understanding of intersectional feminism. She is also described as a cunning marketing strategist who uses the fight against normativity for her own benefit. By giving the examples of other artists, Elisabeth Lechner also shows how their works' success depends on their use of atypical female bodies (old, wrinkled, fat etc.) to trigger disgust. By siding with what is deemed disgusting, they subvert pop feminist culture.

## **Hélène Tison (Université de Tours, France), "Female Strippers! Women Cartoonists in the US"**

- 7 Hélène Tison explains how at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of the few female cartoonists were early feminists. The genre evolved up until the 1950s and the recession that hit the industry. For example, the publishing house DC comics survived and focused on super heroes, while feminist comics lost ground. However, there was a new change in the 1970s when the female cartoonists' need for freedom and emancipation combined with frustration: they launched their own magazine in order to have their work published. The first women's comics magazine was called *It Ain't Me Babe*. Feminism was a central concern, and the cartoonists dealt with social emancipation, social justice, and race issues. They fought for the control of their own bodies, criticized fashion for being detrimental to female bodies, and depicted beauty standards as either a mask or a weapon.

## **Sandrine Galand (Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada), "Artists under Free Fall: Profaning in North- American *Popular Feminism*"**

- 8 For Sandrine Galand feminism is back and the word itself is fetishized in contemporary discourse. In fact, feminism plays an important part in the current collective imagination, but it has been taken over by, and has adapted to, the consumer society and has broken

free from traditional thought. In feminism, the core question is the self and the representation of the self. In "popular feminism," women speak in the first person and use their bodies in their creations and shows. Bodies are neither fetishized nor idealized, they are shown in their crudity to be desecrated. Some artists profane their own bodies to legitimize female bodies, to give them freedom and complexity, and to win the right to irreverence. Hence, "popular feminism" may question a structure that is mainly masculine and that tries to domesticate it.

### **Christian Chelebourg (Université de Lorraine, France), "Would You Like Some More Princesses? Socializing Disney Icons (1999-2017)"**

- 9 In 1999, Disney launched the Princess line. Disney set up a gender-oriented market, and Christian Chelebourg has identified several golden rules Disney follows to create its new princesses. For him, the young girl turns into a princess after a slight conflict that represents an estrangement from second-wave feminism and from previous generations of women. In such stories, emancipation can only be achieved by going back to the origins, so the past is erased, the princess is connected to women of the pre-1970s generation, and her quest is for a happy future. Thus, these princesses take charge of their people's destiny, which seems to be feminist since it is to the benefits of a pleasure-dominated female order. This pleasure revolution leads the princess to go and seek in the past the wished-for optimism. The message is for little girls to retrieve the sense of wonder to bring back hope in a world stricken by post-modernity.

### **Janet McCabe (Birkbeck, University of London, UK), "Disconnected Heroines, Global Femininities: *Bron/ Broen (The Bridge)* and Future Directions for Feminist TV Studies"**

- 10 Janet McCabe asserts that it is time to put politics back in feminism and to give the audience a history of race and gender. Nowadays, fighting for women's rights is perceived as reactionary and so the only way to permanently achieve those rights is to move beyond the notion of gender. She then focuses on the Danish and Swedish show *Bron/Broen (The Bridge)*, 2012 that addresses the issue of female bodies and the diversity of feminist discourses. However, what is striking in the show is how badly protected by the law women are, even in the presence of female police officers. The other element to be underlined is women's representation and place in the workplace: equality is far from achieved as there is no political talk about it and all the female police officers have difficulties to make themselves heard. What is underlined, McCabe concludes, is that being a woman is in itself the core incapacity. But these representations prevail because they belong to media flows that shape the audience's vision of society.

## **Laurence Gervais (Université Paris-Nanterre, France), "Women and Space in the Neoliberal American City: Using and Manipulating Gender Stereotypes and Representations in the Building of New Spaces"**

- 11 For Laurence Gervais, since the 1970s and the theories developed by Foucault, space has been found to be not only determined by materiality, but also the product of social practices and power relations. It enhances multiple differences and how cities are divided. Chicago is the field of this research: the new spaces created by the privatization of the city must be approached as new geographical areas with new symbolic relations. In these new spaces, class, gender and race interact, but spaces created for women only reflect the gender construction and the normative gender roles that prevail in society. Thus, urban spaces can reproduce gendered stereotypes and in turn help convey them. There is a need to re-problematize public and private spheres.

## **Aurélia Michaud-Trévinat (Université de La Rochelle, France), "Ideology of Consumption and Imageries of Women in US Series: A Semiotic Analysis of *Desperate Housewives*, *Sex & the city*, *Gossip Girl* and *The Carrie Diaries*"**

- 12 Aurélia Michaud-Trévinat explains that consumers are constantly surrounded by codes and imageries, and that TV series are vehicles of ideologies that are self-replicating views of power and of inclusion and exclusion. Moreover, almost no research has combined semiotic and consumption-based approaches and it is necessary to focus on the ideology of consumerism. Michaud-Trévinat shows how women in these shows appear subversive because they are different, but in fact they are just as passive as in the traditional model of consumption. Even though shopping may seem like a form of protest, in fact they have integrated the hysteria of consumption and are not critical of it, especially since the shopping environment they seek to appropriate has been created by men for women.

## **Emmanuelle Delanoë-Brun (Université Paris-Diderot, France), "From *Cagney and Lacey* to *Rizzoli and Isles*: Is There such a Thing as a Feminist Cop Show?"**

- 13 Since the 1980s most cop shows have featured females, and Emmanuelle Delanoë-Brun wonders whether these series really challenge cultural and gender stereotypes, and whether women's *profane* – as opposed to men's all but sacred – leadership has been recognized. To do so she focuses on *Cagney and Lacey*, and on *Rizzoli and Isles* to see what degree of feminism is promoted. *Cagney and Lacey* was explicitly intended to carry a feminist agenda, and so this 1980s show focuses on females who are cops and not the reverse. It refuses gender stereotypes and, by dealing with female issues, also publicizes the agenda of organizations and associations supporting women. Three decades later,

*Rizzoli and Isles* has a similar approach, but does not tackle any political and social issues; instead, the show suggests that the fight against sexism has been won and that what matters is finding the right mate. Even if the show is aimed at women, it seeks to attract the male gaze and relies on a marketing strategy that somehow participates in, and glamorizes, violence against women.

## **Noémie Moutel (Université de Caen Normandie, France), "Ecofeminism and Eco-psychology: Counter-cultural Proposals toward a Grassroots Future"**

- 14 Noémie Moutel first clarifies the notion of pop culture by using Theodore Roszak's definition, according to which it can be understood as a breakthrough and a novelty. This definition is relevant to observe the legitimacy and legacy of counter-cultural feminism and ecology. Like the historian of counterculture Roszak, Starhawk – a California-based ecofeminist and pagan writer – aims to bridge the gap between academic research and popular culture. Roszak insisted on science and psychology, and criticized technocracy and society. Starhawk adopted a more alternative lifestyle by being an activist involved in nonviolent actions who favored ecofeminism, mysticism and nature. However, both chose to make their research available to the public. They tried to have ecopsychology and ecofeminism converge to underline the pain humans feel because of the troubled relation they have with the planet they inhabit.

## **Alice Morin (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3, France), "Women's Representations in Fashion Magazines at the Turning Point of the 1970s: the Production and Reception of Stereotypes"**

- 15 According to Alice Morin, fashion magazines are spaces of negotiations insofar as they are part of women's daily lives and modes of production. Until the 1950s, these magazines targeted an elite audience, but in the second half of the 1960s, with the feminist second wave, they were accused of participating in the patriarchal system of oppression. The critique was twofold since they were said to ascribe stereotypical roles to women and to legitimize these roles through the repetition of these role models. The 1970s were a good time for the magazines because it was an in-between era when Americanness served as a unifying element. And so, between 1967 and 1979, the discourse on femininity in these magazines went through three stages, from insolence, to natural beauty, to escapism. Nowadays, while these magazines are not monolithic, they have a hard time trying to avoid stereotypes since it means targeting a narrower audience and not depending on advertisement.

## **Andrei Illi Popescu (Université de Strasbourg, France), "Forever the Woman to Beat: Margaret Thatcher, Political Strong(wo)man and Demise Representations/ Narratives"**

- 16 Andrei Popescu's paper tackles the evolution of the representations of Margaret Thatcher in popular culture. She has been rather prominent because she was a multifaceted person who embodied both the masculine and the feminine, and who was both a strong woman and a warrior queen. She started to become unpopular after her third victory. She is associated with evil figures and is often described and represented as a dictator or a tyrant even though literally she was not. But rather than seeking to establish the historical truth, Popescu focused on popular *perceptions* of the facts and argued that many Thatcher survivors feel the need to have Thatcher and Thatcherism buried.

## **Stéphanie Mercier (Université de Poitiers, France), "Representing Early Modern Women through Modern Popular Culture"**

- 17 Stéphanie Mercier focuses on Shakespeare's plays and on the devices used to adapt them to the modern television gaze. Even in 21<sup>st</sup> century TV productions, the interpretation of Shakespeare's plays is still male-dominated and conveys a patriarchal point of view. Thus, even the adaptations of plays that should give preeminence to women mainly focus on male-dominated situations and issues. However, these adaptations are multifaceted rewritings intended to explain the original text for a contemporary audience.

## **Cristina Diamant (Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai, Roumanie), "Dolorous Lilith, Lolita, on Page, Screen, and in Graphic Novels"**

- 18 Cristina Diamant begins with a reminder that Nabokov's *Lolita* was published more than a century ago and that the word "Lolita" has since become a common noun. Lolitas have proliferated in popular culture even though these representations do not correspond to the boyish girl the original was supposed to be in the novel. It is problematic that these representations sexualize a child and that they are conveyed not only by men, but also by women. This has entailed a Lolita complex in the US, where the image of the Lolita verges on the illegal and the immoral. There are no such negative connotations in Japan, where the Japanese have two words to describe Lolitas, one for the specific esthetic of the Lolita and the other the fantasies of young girls with which men engage; indeed, for the Japanese, only actual sex is about sexuality, whereas everything else is about fiction.



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