Editorial:

Consuming Cultures

This Special Issue of *Feminist Review* on **Consuming Cultures** is concerned with the interrelationship of gender and the circuits of consumption, distribution, production and reproduction. While there is an extensive body of work which focuses on gender and consumption or on gender and production, there is little which considers the different ways in which gender intervenes in all parts of the circuit or the linkages between the different elements. The Special Issue aims to make a contribution to the reframing of these debates.

These complex relationships operate simultaneously on different sites both local and global, which are always played out in relations of power. Consuming cultures are thus gendered, racialized, sexualized and intersected by relations of social class. The Special Issue is concerned with the ways in which the local and the global are implicated in each other and how gender is played out in each. How, for example, do changes in one part of that relation (local–global) impact on the other part? How do such changes and the power relations they constitute affect the production of gendered identities in all the sites of the circuit? What part do pleasure and desire play in the production of these identities? How do people become commodified in the process of production and consumption and what are the different contexts in which people may be active in their own commodification? The articles in this issue address these questions in various ways and from a range of disciplines.

Chris Griffin examines the centrality of consumption in the normative assessment of young people's successful transition to adulthood. Often, young people who are identified as failing are seen to do so in terms of their non-conformity to particular patterns of consumption. The ideals of consumption against which young people are measured generally assume 'youth' to be a unitary category. This fails to take account of the ways in which youth are differentiated by gender, class, 'race' and of the ways in which young people's habits of consumption vary. Griffin's paper reminds us that consumption can simultaneously be used as a regulatory device and, contradictorily, as part of young people's own practices of identification.

The ways in which consumption both produces regimes of knowledge about us and is used by us in the production of our own identifications is discussed by Donna Haraway in her analysis of the impact of new reproductive technologies. She interrogates the representation of 'creation' as a way of discussing the debates around biotechnologies of reproduction, looking at images as diverse as Michelangelo's 'Creation' and the sonogram imaging of the fetus in the womb. Haraway explores the subjective impact and political ramifications of the many metaphors deployed by so-called objective science and other discursive cultural formations for describing and visualizing the changing boundaries of the female body. Her analysis of the political power of these metaphors enables debates about consumption to be linked to contentious debates surrounding reproductive freedom and 'overpopulation' and the ethical and moral considerations that these raise.

Both Griffin's and Haraway's papers foreground the contradictory nature of consumption: it is often experienced as a matter of individual (and, sometimes, oppositional) choice; at the same time it can also function as a method of surveillance and control. It is the possibilities of extracting pleasure from the consumption/production relation, even as one recognizes its potential for exploitation that is addressed, in different ways, by Reina Lewis and Angela McRobbie. McRobbie argues against recent celebrations of consumption in the human sciences by insisting that not everyone has equal access to the consumption of fashion. She examines the gendered and racialized relations of production in the fashion industry without resurrecting the unified subject of some previous class analyses. Her account of how women make and acquire their clothes inside and outside the fashion industry permits us to recognize that there is no necessary contradiction between being an exploited worker in the fashion industry and desiring its products. McRobbie's paper raises questions about how it might be possible to organize for political change in the light of these personal investments.

While McRobbie focuses on the production and consumption of garments, Reina Lewis looks at how the consumption of fashion imagery is itself pleasurable and constitutive of identity. She examines the complexities of the 'identification as consumption' model celebrated by the new lesbian and gay lifestyle press which emerged in the context of the 'pink pound'. By focusing specifically on the fashion editorial content of lesbian lifestyle magazines, Lewis engages with questions about the lesbian and the female gaze. She discusses how pleasures obtained in the transgressive consumption of 'mainstream' women's fashion magazines disappear when lesbian pleasure becomes the overt remit of the lesbian lifestyle magazine.

Visual culture is also addressed in Annie Coombes' discussion with the South African artist, Penny Siopis. Coombes' paper illustrates the ideological nature of visual imagery. Along with other radical South African artists, feminist artists are currently debating questions of priority now that Liberation has arrived. For feminists, this is potentially a very positive moment when questions of gender – so long subordinated to the structural issue of race under apartheid – can now be explored. Penny Siopis' work has long been concerned with the lived and historical relations between black and white women in South Africa and the appropriation of black women's time, lives and labour at different historical conjunctures. This discussion reminds us that culture is never innocently produced or consumed, but is always situated in specific historical and geographical locations and power relations.

Joanna de Groot situates the restructuring of the British system of higher education in its historical context in order to explore how, as subjects, academics are being reconstructed. She argues that one key way to understand these material and cultural transformations is to think of them as processes of commodification: of academic labour, skills and intellectual production. De Groot focuses on the gender dynamics of both the process and the experience of shifting norms, values and practices within academia.

From their different disciplinary perspectives, all the papers in this issue consider the contradictory nature of subjectivities and desire in relation to consumption and production. They illustrate how patterns of consumption are changing. Not only can we talk about the consumption of culture/s but also how the obsession with the act of consumption itself has transformed both the markets and the process of production. Not only do we consume culture/s but we are also consumed by them.

In opening up these questions, this issue of *Feminist Review* invites a rethinking of the production/distribution/consumption circuit in relation to the new regimes of accumulation, power and politics produced by late capitalism at the end of the millennium.

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