Violating the Feminine: War, Kristeva, and The Things They Carried

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"War is nasty," insists Tim O'Brien's narrator in *The Things They Carried*, adding paradoxically, "war is fun" (80). The contradictory experience of war becomes a fixation for O'Brien, and he even interrogates the complexities of his own pleasure in writing about the paradoxes. *The Things They Carried* is thus laced with suspicion not only of the project of war but of the retelling process itself. In a manner much like Julia Kristeva's conflict between the semiotic and symbolic orders, O'Brien unsettles final depictions of the war-experience, while also exposing a disturbing performance underpinning the project in Vietnam. I employ the language and theory of Julia Kristeva as a framework for uncovering these disconcerting underpinnings, arguing in particular that war functions as the violent, sadistic performance of a society directed at a maternal object. In literature of wars like O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, a view of collective violence emerges in which soldiers find pleasure in feminizing the enemy, sexualizing the images and actions of battle, and thus couching their entire enterprise as an attempt to find pleasure in violating the feminine. As a collective performance that evokes some of the most subconscious and visceral tendencies of the human psyche, war, in my analysis, is evidence of unsettling proclivities in cultures of domination that habitually wage such armed conflict. Although I focus particularly on O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, analyses of other examples in the literature of war—especially those of twentieth century America and Britain—suggest the pervasiveness of this undercurrent.

Employing Julia Kristeva's bricolage of psychoanalytical philosophy and feminist structuralism aids in the (re)construction of literary texts as an amalgamation of seemingly unrelated elements. This process analyzes certain tendencies housed within different levels of consciousness, particularly as the force Kristeva calls the "thetic consciousness" produces linguistic and even thematic embodiments of its imperious drives. As Kristeva argues, A telling the disposition enacted through the thetic consciousness represses the author's desires directed toward a maternal subconscious order. In effect, two drives become linguistically embodied in two discrete orders: the symbolic and the semiotic. Critics such as Gill Plain have explored the manner in which Kristeva's theory of the two orders of language assist in understanding the manner in which women writers respond to war. Martha Reineke has, among others, analyzed through a Kristevan lens the violence enacted upon women in Western cultural traditions. Yet little has been done by way of viewing war in men's fiction as archetypal of the struggle between the symbolic and semiotic order, and much less has been made of the feminization of "the other" in war, such that the entire enterprise functions as a violent act against the feminine.

I explore these connections first through the Kristevan struggle between the two discrete orders of language occurring on a variety of levels of consciousness. Yet, while this struggle is often veiled—for example, in scientific discourse—it emerges clearly in texts written in what Kristeva calls "poetic language," and I have therefore chosen O'Brien's work as an example of a text less concerned with veiling its own internal conflicts. Furthermore, in poetic languages the semiotic disrupts the predicative processes of the thetic consciousness, which is a received view of the world inherited during the Oedipal and post-Oedipal stages of psychosomatic development. The semiotic drives' disruption of the thetic consciousness occurs in a diversity of ways in texts, but, as I argue, in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* these instinctual drives—both recognized and veiled—become embodied through linguistic violence and semantic paradoxes, an unstable notion of "truth," and O'Brien's stylization of the war-experience as the "rehappening" of a maternal quest. In effect, these embodiments subvert the order of the thetic consciousness through provisional representations of an unstable *ipsa res*—that is, "the thing itself" or the external reality of the event. Analyzing the conflict between these two drives further reveals that war, as an occasion for subjugating "the other" and encountering the chaotic, often evokes disturbing consequences for the thetic consciousness's paternal finality while also exposing war's sadistic incestuous relation to the maternal.

LINGUISTIC VIOLENCE AND SEMANTIC PARADOXES

The thetic consciousness's primary linguistic manifestation is in the symbolic order of language: that is, because "the signified object is *represented* by the signifying unit" (Kristeva, 1986, p. 64). For Kristeva language offers only an approximation of meaning, but the symbolic order asserts a direct and final relation of signified to signifier. Thus, while representation constitutes a space between signifier and signified. Attempts to posit a direct relationship between signification and a meaning draws on what Kristeva calls paternal logic, the post-Oedipal identification with the "law of the Father" through a child's reception of language (Kristeva, 1980, p. 133). The "law of the Father" is a dictatorial force, and linguistic acts that view themselves as symbolic revelations of final

meaning yield to this law. Yet Kristeva contends that the symbolic order struggles with an opposing disposition, the semiotic, which does not assume that its linguistic performance is a direct relation. Instead, the semiotic order draws on maternal pre-logic, the unrepressed instinctual drives associated with pleasure and fulfillment derived from the pre-Oedipal relationship to the Mother. Nonetheless, for Kristeva, "All enunciation, whether of a word or of a sentence, is thetic" in the sense that it posits meaning (Foss, 1998, p. 43). It is the struggle between the semiotic and symbolic that disturbs the thetic attempt to settle meaning.

The semantic paradoxes and linguistic violence refuse the thetic in that they unsettle any final statement of truth. Whereas, as Chris Foss expresses, the symbolic is "language as meaning," the semiotic elements of the narrative refuse the axiomatic truth of its opposing disposition and allow for the author's instinctual drives to influence the work's language (503). Paradoxes and contradictions, for example, refuse the thetic by forcing a signification to indicate a 'both/and' instead of the customary negation of all other signifieds in relation to one signification. Put in a simpler way, a paradox allows for two contradictory meanings to coexist, which implies that meaning in such instances does not exist in its customarily stable and correlative relationship to other signs. Such paradoxes serve a "*desemanticization* function," to borrow Kristeva's term, by fragmenting descriptions and positing meaning in an indeterminable way ("From One Identity" 142).

For example, O'Brien describes Rat Kiley as a "gentle killer" (69), allowing for violence and benevolence to exist in the same space. These two attributions—"gentle" and "killer"—customarily exist on opposite poles of the signification scale, yet O'Brien "desemanticizes" Rat's identity by refusing final semantic parameters. Similarly, Kiley goes on to contribute to this desemanticization of the symbolic order by describing his own literature, his process and production of meaning, as a "beautiful f****' letter" (69). His description combines a term with the potential for significant meaning with a customarily profane and meaningless term—a senseless obscenity—and thereby Kiley's communication draws its language from the instinctual drives of his psyche.

Specifically, Kiley associates that which is "beautiful" with sexual violence by connotation of the profane aspect of his description. Kiley's instinctual drives manifest the "jouissance of destruction" (Foss, 1998, p. 150)—the aggressive instincts Kristeva associates with rejection during the anal phase before the onset of the fear of castration. The child experiences rejection from the feminine, and this experience leads to both the anal and death drives (149-50). The former, in Kristeva's reading of Freud, often leads to homosexuality. I call this force the 'sadistic instinct', drawing on Kristeva's observations that this experience leads to aggressiveness toward the feminine.

To be more specific, I view the rejection Kiley experiences from Lemon's sister as the cause that unleashes the "sadistic instinct" in relation to the feminine. The death and anal drives of infantile sexuality reappear in Kiley's adult life through this instinct: the former (death drive) leads him to sexual violence, while the latter (anal drive) leads Kiley to find pleasure in both Lemon's memory, which amounts to necrophiliac homosexuality, and in giving up on the "dumb cooze" that rejected him (68). We, as readers, only observe Kiley finding pleasure in Lemon's memory after his death. Therefore, his homosexuality is also necrophilism because O'Brien does not provide an "alive" Lemon—he is always dead in *The Things They Carried*. Rat's pleasure with the dead Lemon is both masochistic in that it causes him pain, despite his gratification with remembering his friend's "stainless steel balls" (67). This instinct not only finds pleasure in sexual violence but also in the sadistic, infantile berating of Lemon's sister, who is one of the few female characters in the novel. Kiley reverts into finding pleasure through defaming the feminine, even as a child in the anal phase sadistically enjoys the suffering of the feminine during a tantrum, for example. In this way, the "object-choice" of Kiley's 'sadistic instinct' is Lemon's sister (Freud, 1961, p. 47), who becomes the adult manifestation of the feminine subject to defecation and aggressiveness during the anal phase of infantile sexuality. Kiley similarly expresses his self-gratifying violence through the pejorative description of "cooze" after the original transference of his sadism redirected at a water buffalo (see below).

In addition, the profanity in the novel also represents the outward manifestation of the psyche's pre-logical response to the senselessness of Kiley's experiences. As Renée Epstein observes, "war is a liberator of the baser instincts of human beings" (469). In this way, Kiley's use of the term "f*****'" represents the liberation of the instinctual into the repressive realm of the thetic consciousness' predications of meaning—propositions which emanate from "the father" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 133). Both the narrator and Kiley employ language in such a way that unsettles meaning, refusing to allow characters or texts to lie exclusively on one side of a typical binary: hence, the possibility of the coexistence of both the profound and profane. Thus, the instinctual drives lead to semantic paradoxes that obviate final meaning. Later, O'Brien recognizes these semantic paradoxes in his narration: "War is nasty; war is fun. [...] The truths are contradictory" (80).[1]

AN UNSTABLE NOTION OF "TRUTH"

In addition to these contradicting descriptions, the repetition and emphasis of the term 'true' similarly unsettles the thetic consciousness. As the chapter title indicates, O'Brien is concerned with the ways in which a story may be called 'true': the term appears fourteen times in this chapter and only twelve in the rest of the book. The usage of the word slides across a scale of meanings, however, as the author employs it for a variety of purposes, ultimately suggesting that the term and its customary signifieds are heterogeneous. In Kristeva's analysis this amounts to the manifestation of the struggle between the semiotic and symbolic processes of language in that "a multiple and sometimes even uncomprehensible signified is nevertheless communicated" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 134). In other words, O'Brien's use of 'true' serves as the battleground for the two dispositions of language. Because the semiotic generally predominates in the text, the discourse of the narrative is poetic language; yet O'Brien establishes a new signification process with his destabilizing use of these terms, such that it "nonetheless posits a thesis, not of a particular being or meaning, but of a signifying apparatus [...] an undecidable process between sense and nonsense" (135). In this way, O'Brien signifies through the word 'true', but he has no final, predicative, or stable sense for the notion.

The instinct subverting the symbolic order in this instance is a product of the liminal phase after a child's fear of castration but before the reception of the Father's (repressive) law at the onset of puberty. Freud calls this a phase of "latency" and characterizes it as a lull in sexuality (Freud, 1969, p. 23). The repressed instincts have not yet acceded to the paternal logic of final meaning, but they also are insecure about finding pleasure in the instinctual pre-logic of the Mother's body based on the Father's prohibitions. Because of this situation, one may call this the 'idealizational instinct' in that it operates under these confusing restrictions while nonetheless longing for the pleasure and union derived from the Mother. This instinct is more clearly analyzable after its perplexing situation develops further in the chapter.

As an unconscious expression of this instinct, O'Brien claims, "It's all exactly true," throughout his recollection of Lemon's death (70).[2] Yet, despite these frequent claims, he then subverts the customary meaning of the term 'true' by intentionally revealing that his narrative is not *exactly* what occurred. He admits, "It's hard to tell you what happened next" (70), and concedes to changing details, "adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth" (85), much like Sanders' admission that there "wasn't any glee club" (77). O'Brien later admits to changing the location and weather of his story about Lemon for his own narrative agenda. Nonetheless, O'Brien is adamant that his narrative is somehow "true" by suggesting propositions for a 'true war story' (85). These propositions manifest the struggle between the order of the Father to make language 'mean' and the pre-logical instincts of the Mother that allow for unconscious, unrepressed pleasure in pre-logic.

In this way, O'Brien distrusts the paternal logic that predicates a definition of "true" while also articulating that somehow there exists a resident need for such a Father's "potency" (Krestiva and Clement, 2001, p. 24). Kristeva likewise admits that a woman maintains both "need" and "distrust" for the paternal power that manifests itself partially through enunciation. Therefore, the meaning of 'true' can exist in a state of flux in O'Brien's work, and it is the confused instincts of the liminal phase between (perceived) castration and acquisition of the Father's language that cause such a drive to determine the language. Hence, this language is the product of a drive stuck between Mother and Father, not yet acceding to the paternal law but insecure about finding pleasure from the maternal body. In other words, the "idealizational instinct" leads O'Brien to reenter a perplexed state of latency or liminality. The instinctual at this point nonetheless finds pleasure in the Mother's body through its idealization of the maternal wholeness. The semiotic 'true' in the narrative expresses O'Brien's instinctual remembering of his union with the Mother, and it becomes an opportunity for idealizing that state regardless of the author's transitional condition between the law of the Father and pleasure with the Mother.

Kristeva characterizes such undercurrents within a novel in *Proust and the Sense of Time* by claiming it "transgresses all bounds" in that it simultaneously "destroys and reconstructs the world" through its employment of language (25-26). Of course, O'Brien's novel is not one of the texts of French modernism that Kristeva has in mind, but his work clearly unsettles customary notions of 'true' as historical verity or occurrence, while reconstructing it through the pre-logic of its language and in its semiotic elements. Especially important for Kristeva, however, is that these underlying elements originate from the pre-Oedipal instincts associated with the pleasure of the maternal body. O'Brien's release of the semiotic into the text amounts to incest in that the narrative finds pleasure from the Mother's body through the sadistic instincts engendered during the anal phase or the idealization of the latency period. This instinctual pleasure occurs despite the prohibitions of paternal logic—the order required by the thetic and its symbolic language. In other words, the repetition and uncustomary usage of the concept of 'truth', the contradictory descriptions, and the obscene, meaningless language serve the purposes of the semiotic disposition by positing a maternal 'true' that is pre-logical in its pleasure and manifestations. This maternal 'true' unsettles the paternal 'true', which is an absolute predication by the thetic consciousness.

WAR AS THE "REHAPPENING" OF A MATERNAL QUEST

One specific example of this view of "rehappening" is Mitchell Sanders' story of a six-man patrol on a reconnaissance mission (71-76). The soldiers encounter unexplainable and maddening noises in the lonely Vietnamese mountains—everything from chamber music to a barbershop quartet—all of which originate in the American social life of the soldiers' psyche. Sanders states the underlying eeriness of the experience: "this isn't civilization. This is Nam" (74). Both *The Things They Carried* and Sanders' story unravel in a place and time unsettling for

customary assumptions and logical delineation of truth. Instead, "this is Nam" and such a monolithic view of what 'happened' struggles against an encounter with the instinctual, the semiotic, the unbinding of language from symbolic modalities. Its unsettling function leads to the instinctual: the soldiers "get arty and gunships. They call in air strikes. [...] They walk napalm up and down the ridges" (75). They become sadists, and the "object-choice" of their gratification-violence is the senseless and decisively feminine sounds in the mountains: "martini glasses," a "mama-san soprano," and all of Vietnam that refuses to fit logical (i.e., paternal) categories of "civilization" and "jungle" (74). In this way, they find sadistic pleasure in getting "arty" against the feminine.

In this episode, the violence that arises as a result of the instinctual leads next to a direct confrontation with the thetic consciousness. The thetic consciousness appears in the person of the colonel who confronts the patrol after their eerie experience. O'Brien overtly states his use of this figure as a representation of those who desire "to know what the f****** story is" (75)—those who want categorical statements of truth and fact. Yet the soldiers refuse to answer the colonel: "They just look at him for a while, sort of funny like, sort of amazed," says Sanders, "and the whole war is right there in that stare. It says everything you can't ever say" (75). Thus, the need of the thetic consciousness for symbolic order becomes frustrated through characters who, similar to Chris Foss' Kristevan analysis in another context, serve as the "disorientation of strict linear meaning" (502).

Earlier in *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien describes his literary reproduction of the war-experience as a "kind of rehappening" or an unending re-entry into the past (32), which leads the author into perpetual re-creation and the refusal of the moralizing strictures of definitive meaning. He states, "The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over" (32), and this perpetual re-remembering leads the author to the unstable, seemingly senseless conclusion, "Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true. [...] In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (81, 82). Not only is the notion of 'truth' in flux again, but this 'rehappening' is also an opportunity for the semiotic to begin its unfinalizable process of positing a maternal 'true', particularly through the masochistic instincts developed during the anal phase.

The primary location for this quest is the distinction in "How to Tell a True War Story" between what *seemed* to occur (perception) and what *happened* (past occurrences), both of which serve as constitutive elements of the truth (71). Yet O'Brien seamlessly weaves these two together, which, in terms of Kristeva's thoughts, equates to the expression of both frustration and jouissance (with all its sexual connotations) in "not quite pinning down the final and definitive truth" (76). As the *seemed* and *happened* become indistinguishable, the retelling operates in "its own dimension" (32), creating the possibility, for example, that "you'd never know that Curt Lemon was dead" (240).[3] Consequently, O'Brien on the one hand describes the dynamic between *seemed* and *happened* as a struggle with paternal predications regarding (putative) facts and occurrences. Yet, on the other hand, this "rehappening" is instinctual in so far as it is masochistic: O'Brien finds gratification in the pain of remembering.

Rat Kiley's response after the death of Curt Lemon similarly evinces these masochistic and idealizational instincts, which the war-experience raises within the psyche of soldiers. Kiley redirects his instinctual, unbounded rage over the death of his friend against a baby water buffalo by shooting it in the nose, knees, ears, stomach, and throat. O'Brien stylizes this episode as "essential, something brand-new and profound, a piece of the world so startling there was not yet a name for it" (79). As mentioned above, Rat Kiley later sublimates his rage and anguish by writing a letter to Lemon's sister; when she neglects to respond, Kiley again instances the sadistic instinct toward the feminine by berating and humiliating her as a "dumb cooze" (68, 85).

Before the sadism toward Lemon's sister, however, Kiley's instinctual rage leads him to a masochistic idealization of the feminine. When the innocent animal fails to propitiate Kiley's anger, he begins to cry and "tried to say something, but then cradled his rifle and went off by himself" (79). The instinctual leads Kiley to retreat into an infantile need for comfort and cradling, which amount to, on the one hand, a search for the maternal wholeness idealized in pre-Oedipal stages of development. On the other hand, he cradles a *weapon*, which has long been associated as a symbol for the phallus in literature, whether in a gun, sword, or pen. Kristeva categorizes such appearances of the phallus as a function of the symbolic order—an insertion by the thetic to establish the dominance of the paternal law in the narrative (Kristeva, 1984, p. 47). In this way, the soldier gropes for meaning, cradling the phallus and searching for predications about the senseless death of his friend. Yet this necrophilic 'remembering' also fails, and Kiley's retreat "off by himself" is irresolvably a maternal quest, much like O'Brien's "rehappening" of his experience (32).

Kiley's maternal quest does not recover this idealized wholeness: the recourse to find comfort in his rifle fails. More importantly, Kiley does not reappear in "How to Tell a True War Story" beyond O'Brien's recollections of his sadism, idealization, and masochism, which leaves the other soldiers waiting for "Rat to get himself together" (80). The "instinctual economies" expressed in Kiley's actions elucidate the heterogeneity between signification and meaning, between Lemon's death and categorical understanding, between Kiley's transferred rage and the recovery of wholeness (Krestiva, 1980, p. 146). There is no union or homogeny among these 'betweens'. As a result, the symbolic order struggles with Kiley's instincts, and the "repression" of a "univocal, increasingly pure signifier"—the product of paternal logic—becomes an impossibility for articulating the war-experience (143).

CONCLUSION

In true Kristevan fashion, O'Brien concludes both "How to Tell a True War Story" and *The Things They Carried* without finality. The struggle continues as the undercurrent of sadistic instincts and masochistic idealizations seek to receive pleasure from the Mother, while paternal logic prohibits this pre-logical manifestation of language outside the Father's approved system. In this way, the instinctual drives and semiotic disposition underlying the narrative interrogate the thetic consciousness established by the Father (Freud, 1969 p. 142). The polyphony of O'Brien's signifiers frustrates the reception of the world according to the language of paternal logic, and these significations accomplish the opposite of their customary function by desemanticizing the war-experience. They explode meaning in such a way that "at the same time destroys and reconstructs the world" (Kristeva, 1993, p. 26). The resulting pleasure is incestuous in so far as it finds jouissance in the humiliation and suffering of the feminine—a sadistic version of playing with the Mother's body.

Certain characters, such as the intransigent colonel, embody attempts to stamp paternal finality on the war-experience. In such attempts, violence is also enacted upon the retelling itself as alternative, fluid, and subversive meanings become marginalized or silenced. The fluidity of these alternatives, in the language of Kristeva, is the product of the feminine chora, the maternal pre-logic that subverts the law of the father (again, the colonel is a prime example). War, both in its happening and in its remembering, thus performs violence upon the feminine. Societies that glamorize war participate in similar sadistic performances, whether through their suppression of alternative and non-final recollections of the society's wars or through active participation in sexualizing the conflict and feminizing the enemy. Furthermore, because this feminization may be as subtle as depicting the enemy through the language of inferiority, the entire war-enterprise participates in a habit of mind by which violent gender constructions are enforced.

O'Brien's work is certainly not unique in evoking the nature of war as violence against a maternal object. In Hemingway's *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, for example, El Sordo's group of trapped guerrilla fighters slander their enemies while discussing the possibility of assistance from Pilar and Robert Jordan's group. After a series of sexualized epithets directed against their enemies, one man in this group hopes their compatriots will "[t]ake these sluts from the rear" (311). El Sordo's men continue to feminize their enemies until the embattled group is finally killed in an air strike. The majority of the battle scenes in Hemingway's novel are similarly laced with sadistic sexualizations of the war effort—not to mention Carl Eby's argument that Maria's nickname evinces Robert

Jordan's sublimated hostility toward her.

War as the collective performance of violence upon the feminine is therefore by no means unique to O'Brien. As a matter of fact, the pervasiveness of this undergirding psyche to the enterprise of collective violence is unsettling, and its revisionist strictures upon the retelling process are comparable acts of sadism. My reading of O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is therefore as much a work of social criticism as it is an interpretation of a literary text. This discussion implicates various streams within American culture in which war has become a fetish through popular media, and voices dissenting against this obsession are often marginalized. In the least, the language of war, being couched in a framework rife with internal struggle, ought to beg for continual reappraisals of the enterprise itself, and the feminized object of ideologies in support of such collective conflicts further necessitates that we interrogate our culture of domination and its disturbing habits of mind.

Endnotes

[1] According to Kristevan theory, the *chora* drives O'Brien's language into these difficulties. This force is the complex lying at "the foundations of the signifying process," and the drives and instinctual processes uncovered in psychoanalytic theory constitute this totality (Middleton 83). The *chora* influences language by allowing instinctual drives to direct, manipulate, and predominate the signifying process. In other words, the influence of the *chora* is seen when language expresses unconscious instincts, regardless of the clarity with which it signifies meaning, and it exposes the neuroses and symptoms falling within the interests of psychoanalytic theory. As a result, Kristevan theory reveals, among other things, that the contradictory combinations of adjectives in the work are the result of the influence of the *chora*. This influence evinces the ways in which O'Brien has conceptualized his war-experience as a contradictory or senseless event.

[2] Similar concerns that the audience believes in the 'truth' of the story appear on pp. 67, 70, 71, 74, 76, and 84.

[3] O'Brien is broadly aware of the influence of his psychological processes. Regarding the 'retelling' process, he states, "You take your material where you find it, which is in your life, at the intersection of past and present. The memory-traffic feeds into a rotary up on your head, where it goes in circles for a while, then pretty soon imagination flows in and the traffic merges and shoots off down a thousand different streets" (34-35).

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Book Reviews

Berlant, Lauren. ***The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture.*** Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2008. 368 pages. 41 b&w illus. $84.95 cloth, ISBN 978-0-8223-4184-0; $23.95 paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-4202-1.

Berlant's latest book is part of an ambitious project investigating "national sentimentality" wherein she points to the development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of an American political space in which people identify personally and relate socially on what is essentially an affective, emotional basis.

Primarily focusing on "intimate publics" such as the U.S. middle class "women's culture" that developed on a mass basis roughly in the 1830s, Berlant's main concerns are based on "an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a world view and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly commonly lived history..." (viii). There are two elements that receive most of Berlant's analytic attention. One is the affective nature of the "public," a sense that what women read or see in this regard is made up of immediately and personally recognizable plots and feelings and that this indicates a commonality taken as proof of experience, interpretation, and solution to the trials and tribulations of life lived as a woman. The second is that this experience and expectation is mediated by a mass produced and marketed popular culture. Participation comes through consumption and is governed by the economics of capitalism and the aesthetics of commodification.

Berlant uses literary and historical analyses over a wide range of American popular culture from the mid-nineteenth century on as her data, and relies on the popular and productive French psychoanalytic theories of Lacan, Derrida, and others. Novels, stage shows, film, and television are subjected to close readings to illustrate her theories.

Aimed at scholars and advanced graduate students, Berlant's language is densely laden with contemporary technical terms of literary analysis. The richness of her language indicates the breadth and depth of her vision. However, the insistence of her analysis leads to repetition, and the density of her exposition makes the writing more weighty than it should, making for often ponderous reading, lapsing sometimes into academic clichés. Perseverance and re-reading, however, will be rewarded.

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