
REVIEWS

Juliet Flower MacCannell. *The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. 328p.

Carolyn Tilghman Bitzenhofer
University of Notre Dame

Entering through Sade's perverse boudoir in *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, exiting through Lacan's "talk" of courtly love in *Seminar VII*, with an epilogue that circles the reader back and out via Marguerite Duras' perverse bedroom in *Destroy, She Said*, Juliet Flower MacCannell's *The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject* is a rich, sometimes bewildering, invariably thought-provoking primer for feminism in quest of a future female subject. The inquiries into perversity, the psychoanalytic concepts, and the examples provided by MacCannell are meant to buttress her call for a revised model of psychoanalysis. To date, MacCannell argues, the methods available for carving out the girl's sexual identification and her relation to society have been sadism and psychoanalysis. But these, she says, are flawed, partial, even harmful, means. They leave the girl and the woman she becomes without an ethical relation to society. This given, MacCannell sets herself the daunting tasks of, first, determining the consequences to women of "the knowledge" that sadism and Freudian psychoanalysis have "put into the world" (xv) and, then, of explaining how psychoanalysis can facilitate a future female subject and a feminine ethic that places women in a new relation with sexuality, speech, and society.

The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject is theoretically sophisticated. MacCannell assumes her readers' familiarity with Freudian, Lacanian, and object-relations schools of psychoanalysis and with sadism. In that she addresses the need for a model of feminine desire and then initiates dialogue about how such a model might be constructed, MacCannell's book will interest feminists and psychoanalysts who take traditional psychoanalysis to task for its failure to think through a female subject adequately. Likewise, it will appeal to feminists who regard sexual difference as fundamental to the creation of a language that speaks women's desire. In addition, MacCannell's book is intended for readers interested in how psychoanalytic theory usefully informs cultural studies. Sensitive to the criticism that psychoanalysis fails as cultural critique, MacCannell sets out, in very convincing fashion, to demonstrate that this is just not so. From the hysterical girl's encounters with the obscenity that falls "into her lap" every day in media culture,

MacCannell moves her analysis back and forth in time and across several major social contexts. While doing so, she capably demonstrates the relevance of psychoanalytic theory in describing and critiquing the formation of several major social movements. In chapters four and five, her investigations of the perverse logic structuring racist and fascist cultures are especially provocative in this regard.

The book is divided into two parts that explore “the darker side” of our cultural ethic (chapters 1-6) and a “brighter view of the same” (chapter 8-10). Its ten chapters are further divided into sections. In these, MacCannell presents a potpourri of examples from literature, film, art, philosophy, and political theory. As indicated, MacCannell’s project is ambitious. And the contract she makes with readers is demanding. As such, the division of her book into parts and of chapters into shorter sections facilitates an easier ingestion of the numerous examples and the sometimes difficult concepts that she sets before her readers. Part one of her book analyzes a variety of “isms” which are products of the obscene ethic underlying contemporary culture. Although sundry and sweeping, the examples selected are consistently compelling and MacCannell’s analysis is discerning. Among other things, she follows the perversity in Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* as the hysteric (Charlie) invites the pervert (her uncle, Charlie) into her home. She delineates the “seamy underside” of colonialism in her reading of Kleist’s *Betrothal in Santo Domingo*. She describes the racism underlying Adorno’s denunciation of jazz in *Aesthetics and Politics*. She explores the invocatory power of fascism through Arendt’s analysis of Adolph Eichmann’s perverse identification with “the principle behind the law” in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Finally, turning to Melanie Klein, she explains how, in 1950s “momism,” the nuclear family was made to serve as an ideological shelter from the perceived threat of nuclear annihilation. As these examples reveal, a lot is going on here.

Although the girl seems left behind in MacCannell’s discussion of colonialism, racism, and fascism, a key concept gives shape and connection to each of her chapters: the “Thing.” The “Thing” is that which sets the girl in proximal relation to the obscene “isms” symptomatic of contemporary culture. Since it cannot be contained by the Law, the “Thing” is fundamentally and overwhelmingly immoral. Related by MacCannell to Lacan’s *jouissance*, Klein’s sadistic superego, and Freud’s *Das Ding*, it appears in many, and confusing, guises throughout her book. MacCannell remarks the “Thing”’s relationship to the superego which is, in turn, linked “to the Mother’s voice.” And it is this obscene superego that “induces your enjoyment and punishes you for it at the same time” (9). But the “Thing” also marks, among other things, the bad/ good object, boundless *jouissance*, “radical evil,” the Good, inhumanity, nature, and the mother’s body. Keeping track of the

“Thing” in its many guises and as it variously connects with the hysterical girl, the Mother, the Lady, castration, obscenity, the Law, and the “isms” symptomatic of western civilization is taxing. However, MacCannell is a skilled writer, and she does a virtuoso job of tracking, sorting, explaining, and containing these connections.

In the second part of her book, MacCannell claims for women a special authority in regard to the violence that characterizes contemporary culture. We must, she says, create a new model for female desire that places women in an active and ethical relation to society. We need, she says, to make women’s silences speak in a credible way “about the brutality of what passes for our symbolic and legitimate order” (181). For MacCannell, one means for creating this model is to renew Freud’s contract with the hysteric in order to articulate the significance of her silence. Making her point, MacCannell explains how Maya Angelou, in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, and Margaret Atwood, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, render hysterical silence into language that communicates in a cultural register different from that found in men’s words. Even as her reading of Atwood’s book proves a fascinating incursion into the realm of hysterical phantasy, her reading of Angelou’s autobiography is especially germane as a real example of the sexual and racial violence visited on young girls. Then, in Stendhal’s *La Vie de Henry Brulard*, MacCannell presents a compelling example of how an accomplished man “holds up the letter against the phallus” (219) in order to create a language other than that permitted by epic narrative. But, in the end, as she searches for an alternative to the deprivation accorded women by Freud or the sexual abandon offered them by Sade, MacCannell turns to art and to Lacan.

Arguing the necessity for both art (sublimation) and sexual difference in the construction of a new model of feminine desire, MacCannell thinks Lacan right in proposing the possibility of a feminine *jouissance* “inscribed between the system of signs and Things themselves” (239). According to Lacan, this other *jouissance* will not reference Mother or phallus; it will not be procreative. As with the Lady of courtly love, it will enter into existence only through art. For, like sadism, art skirts the law. But, unlike sadism, it creates new “forms of Beauty.” These forms are capable of blocking the “Thing” and of setting up a relation to it other than the one demanded by phallic Law. Here, MacCannell attempts to move beyond Lacan. Like him, she wants to construct a new relation to the “Thing” based on a sexual difference that is not reducible to the Mother. But, in addition, she wants to shift ground and give expression to “the subjective side of the Lady” (246).

Yet, as MacCannell herself notes, “few women will be entirely happy” with her agenda (xv). Her association of the Mother with the obscene “Thing” that she sees subtending contemporary culture will disturb readers who are not willing to credit this equation. And there is a way in which the intensity of the girl’s pain is lost in the apathy of the pervert as well as in MacCannell’s discussions of hysteria and the “isms” symptomatic of our culture. While MacCannell anticipates this criticism by remarking that, for Lacan, the feminine “Thing” also has its “dignity,” a “sympathetic side,” and offers “a way out of the world of goods” (250), not everyone who follows or admires her reasoning will agree with it. Then there are feminists and cultural theorists who will argue that efforts to construct a viable female subject based on irreducible sexual difference and segregation lack practicality in dealing with the real world. Finally, what troubles me most about this sustained and otherwise excellent effort is the abstraction of the model provided for the future female subject. As I reached the end of MacCannell’s book, I found myself questioning its applicability. I was left to wonder what exactly “the subjective side of the Lady” means? How, precisely, does the Lady that MacCannell ends with relate to a flesh-and-blood girl? And how does this Lady and the hysterical girl that MacCannell begins with translate into the lives of ordinary women? In other words, what meaning, what relevance, what practical value does her model have for me as an aging housewife or for my daughter, just now becoming a woman? The connections here are faint. And so, in a book audacious, ambitious, and appealing, I was left to wonder and wanting more. Perhaps MacCannell will write a sequel that will more fully define “the subjective side of the Lady” in her new relation to *jouissance*. *The Hysteric’s Guide to The Future Female Subject* calls for one. But, putting any quibbles aside, MacCannell is not afraid to embrace controversy or to stimulate thought. And she initiates a much needed dialogue about women’s ethical relation to society. As such, her book demands response. I recommend it to cultural theorists, to students of psychoanalysis, to artists, and to those willing to think carefully about how girls grow into women in our culture. ✨