

Sydney's department stores. They enjoyed the free show — frequently staged during lunchtimes so that working women could attend — as a source of fashion information, aesthetic spectacle and simple entertainment. Some, no doubt, bought the goods. But the presentations also, as Haug suggests, played on and substantially fulfilled women's desire for sensual gratification.

There were perhaps other ways in which women selectively appropriated elements of commodity aesthetics for their own purposes. One working woman told a government inquiry into the cost of living in 1918 that she chose to pay more for a camisole trimmed with lace because only a nun would wear plain underclothes. Others clearly enjoyed the rich carpets of the ladies' showroom, the comfort of the lounges provided for them and the fun of trying on a number of hats with no intention of buying.

Half a dozen pearl buttons, an artificial flower or a few inches of pretty ribbon satisfied many women's desire for beauty and pleasure without making them either the dupes of capital or agents of resistance. They enjoyed the sensations of being in the store, viewed with pleasurable anticipation the prospect of ownership, and appreciated the aesthetic lures deliberately placed in their path by retailers and advertisers.

The decision to buy (and how much to buy) depended on a separate set of material conditions and a different mental process. To extend Haug's theory, we could say that these consumers removed and appropriated the aesthetic wrapping of commodities without necessity buying — literally or metaphorically — the goods.

Haug's critique of 'commodity aesthetics', then, helps us to escape the consumer as victim/agent dichotomy. But it does little to look behind the sexual asymmetry in consumption: that is behind the fact that historically consumers have been predominantly female, and that retailers have since at least the late

nineteenth century been aware of that fact.

If mass marketing has manipulated and met the sensual needs of the consumer, then I would suggest it has done so in a social and historical context in which sensuality has been by definition feminine. Retailers and their allies have constructed their marketing theories around a common perception of women as more irrational, seducible and implusive than men.

Judith Williamson suggests that 'the point about consumerism is that people are getting something out of it — but something which the left must be able to offer in a different form'. If the left is to tackle seriously and appropriate the politics of consumerism, then it must do so not only by providing an alternative

source of control and security but also by recognising that women might be getting something different out of it than men.

#### NOTES:

1. Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions. The Dynamics of Popular Culture* (London: Marion Boyars, 1986).

2. W.F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics. Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, translated by Robert Bock (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).

GAIL REEKIE teaches in Humanities at Griffith University.

## French Lessons

Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* was a landmark in the feminist movement. It told of the lives of a generation of modern women, and in doing so literally changed the lives of many of the women who read it. Since then, Marilyn French has written *The Bleeding Heart*, *Beyond Power* and, most recently, *Her Mother's Daughter*, published on the tenth anniversary of *The Women's Room*. Nicci Gerrard talked to her about her books and beliefs.

It is now ten years since *The Women's Room* was published. Women who shied away from the word feminism read it and their lives were transformed. Can you say, now, why it had such a powerful effect?

We do not realise the degree to which we are censored in our public speech. *The Women's Room* spelt the truth about how a lot of women felt. I knew because I'd listened to them. I simply told the truth and women knew it wasn't a truth coming to them from outside but a truth they had known and felt and never before

seen reflected in their culture. When they did see it they recognised it instantly and realised that they were not alone and the reason that they were unhappy was not because they were neurotic or bad — but that this was a cultural fact of what happens to women. And it empowered them. Possession of the truth is always empowering. *The Women's Room* legitimated women's work and women's lives in a way that nothing else had done.

The novel was also so important because it was both radical and deliberately popular, which is a difficult tightrope to walk. Did you consciously choose this form?

Very much so. It was one of the reasons that it was so hard to write — the entire problem lay in tying in the right voice. I worked on it for many years. I worked on many versions, and then I thought of splitting the central consciousness between the enlightened and the unenlightened woman. I was very aware of having to translate the

radical core in order to take it to ordinary people in a language they would understand.

**Did you yourself live the suburban, trapped life you describe in *The Women's Room*?**

Yes. Of course, I never believed it at the time I was living it. I kept thinking that I wasn't; not really. I was really a writer and of course this had nothing to do with the real me — and yet somehow or other it had everything to do with me. It was my life.

**In the ten years since *The Women's Room* has been published, how do you think feminism has changed in the States?**

I think that it is much less confrontational. I think the second stage is a process of growing in deep, burrowing in, making sure that those laws that are already on the books are actually abided by. That's one level of activism. And there is now a deepening at the roots of feminism so that there are lots of women who will say: 'I'm not a feminist but I want equal pay for equal work, I certainly think my husband ought to do half the housework and childcare and so forth'. Women are now saying, 'I want to drive a truck so why shouldn't I?' They wouldn't have dared to say things like this twenty five years ago.

And the third thing that is happening, which in some ways does seem to me to be the most important, is the theory and intellectual work that is going on. The most brilliant stuff is coming from feminists. It only hits a small part of the population, the rest of the country probably doesn't even know it's happening — but students are exposed to it more and more and maybe within fifteen or twenty years we will have built the foundations to enable us to come up with alternative political forms.

**You sound very optimistic about the future.**

I am optimistic in some ways. I think the entire born again movement, the renewal of patriarchal

religion which is a backlash against feminism, is frightening. But I'm not so worried about women. The religious revival and the political content of that religious revival doesn't threaten women so much as it threatens blacks. It is a pernicious philosophy and I suppose women are threatened — for instance, abortion rights may be in danger.

What I would like to see in every nation in the world is 50% of its budget being spent on children and on fostering childcare. The most important thing a country produces is the next generation. We need schools and medical care and educational care and decent ways for mothers to have a baby and yet find a way to support themselves — and



it's so hard.

**And how has your own feminism changed and developed over the last ten years?**

It hasn't changed at all. I knew ten years ago that no matter how we changed other things, the wall that women are up against — having children — is going to remain until men themselves change. Whether to have a baby or not, how your life is going to alter if you do have one, how you sacrifice yourself or are involved in that are still women's decisions as if women were totally responsible for the next generation and men were not. And whatever changes in the law occur, the fact is that sooner or later you're going

to be up against it: are you going to have a baby or are you not going to have a baby?

**Which brings us to your latest novel, *Her Mother's Daughter*, a book which deals with those very issues as they affect and damage four generations of women. It is dedicated to your mother who died last year — is it something you have needed to write for a long time?**

Yes. My mother was the most important person in my life; my feelings about her deeply affected my personal life. But I think there is a terrible isolation in motherhood where one poor woman alone is responsible. The little infant is all potential and there is no way that you can respond to everything in that baby.

You ask a woman to sacrifice her life for her child and she'll do it just as she's been doing it for a long time — but she's going to charge those children for it because she's a human being not a saint.

***Her Mother's Daughter* addresses the questions of self-censorship and self-sacrifice. Are you aware of areas of self-censorship in your own life and writing?**

I think that there are different forms of censorship. For instance, I could never portray a black person or a Jew as evil. There's just too much history on the other side and I could never do it. I think that I could do it even though there are bad black people, bad Jewish people and very bad American Indians. But I don't think I suffer from too much self-censorship except for that. In this book certainly I don't portray mothers as saints and in all of my books women hurt each other even if they are also sympathetic. I try to be honest. I really do try to be honest.

---

**NICCI GERRARD is the author of a forthcoming book on women's publishing.**

---