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The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

**POPULAR CULTURE
AND FEMINISM**

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AND FEMINISM
2022**

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EDITORIAL¹

Dominika Czakon, Stefano Marino and Natalia Anna Michna

Popular culture surely represents a fundamental aspect in our time and hence an important phenomenon to be investigated also for contemporary intellectuals (including philosophers, art theorists, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, fashion theorists, scholars of cultural studies, etc.). This is due to popular culture's role in compelling us to broaden and rethink a part of the vocabulary and conceptuality of certain academic disciplines, its leading role in shaping our taste preferences and aesthetic criteria, and – more generally – its undeniable impact and influence on people's ideas, opinions and choices, including aesthetic, ethical and socio-political views at a global scale. Popular culture definitely deserves a serious attention at various levels, including a philosophical level, inasmuch as philosophy (also profitably intersected with different research approaches in the social and human sciences) has often proved to be able to offer significant and fruitful conceptual tools to decipher in original ways these and other defining phenomena of our time.

The implications and consequences of all this are manifold, ramified and diversified, and they also include the relation between contemporary popular culture and feminism. For example, as noted by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser in their book *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2019), today feminism “risks becoming a trending hashtag and vehicle of self-promotion, deployed less to liberate the many than to elevate the few” (p. 10), and also popular culture can sometimes play a role in this process. For Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, in the modern age “norms of gender and sexuality [have been] broadly diffused, including via colonialism and mass culture, and they [have been] widely enforced by repressive and administrative state power. [...] The mainstream media continues to equate *feminism*, as such, with *liberal feminism* [that], far from providing the solution,” for these critical theorists is rather “part of the problem” (ibid., p. 35). At the same time, it is clear that a feminism that aims to reach attention of the many, and not only of the few, cannot help trying to spread its message through all the available instruments. These instruments may include nowadays –

¹ For Stefano Marino this work, as co-editor of the present issue of *Popular Inquiry*, represents one of the outcomes of his participation – as a member of the Research Unity based at the University of Bologna – to the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN) entitled “Italian Feminist Photography: Identity Politics and Gender Strategies,” funded by the Italian Minister for University and Research (MUR), and guided by Prof. Federica Muzzarelli as Principal Investigator.

beside academic works, journal articles or other publications – pop-rock music, film, TV series, comics, fashion etc., and also the extraordinary impact of social media on our everyday life.

This evidently creates a problematic but at the same time stimulating dialectics between the power and potentialities of popular culture today, on the one hand, and the aims of contemporary feminism (including its most radical, coherent and politically committed versions), on the other hand. This kind of dialectics becomes even more intriguing if we consider how certain leading figures of contemporary feminism (Angela Davis, Judith Butler, and others) have acquired in the last decades the status of veritable “icons” or “stars” of our time. A decisive role, in the process of “popularization” of these and other feminist theorists, has been played by various forms of popular culture (as in the famous examples of the songs dedicated to Angela Davis by rock stars such as John Lennon or The Rolling Stones) and, again, by the widespread diffusion and impact of social networks in the last years.

In the present issue of *Popular Inquiry* on the topic “Popular Culture and Feminism” we aim to offer our readers a collection of original articles dealing with a wide range of experiences and practices that characterizes the universe of popular culture today. The specific focus of the present volume concerns the question of the relation between popular culture and feminist issues, and especially the question as to whether popular culture can contribute to the critique and the overcoming of male chauvinist and antifeminist prejudices, stereotypes and negative situations that are sadly still very present in our time. On this basis, we have encouraged our authors to seek original perspectives on the broad topic of popular culture and feminism. In planning this issue of *Popular Inquiry*, we were interested in articles that could address this topic in innovative ways, including both historical and theoretical approaches. We have thus invited authors from various research fields to submit articles related to (but not limited) questions and issues such as: the role that popular culture played in disseminating feminist ideas also beyond feminist organizations and activism; the place of feminist theories within contemporary popular culture; what can feminist theory learn from popular culture and vice-versa; how feminism transformed popular culture from the 1960s until today and vice-versa; the different ways in which feminist theories have engaged with popular culture; the concept of popular feminism as an expression of the wider circulation of feminist ideas across the popular culture; the question of domestic femininities in contemporary popular culture; the modern portrayals of gender in popular culture; the figures of girl, female teenager, young woman and old woman in popular culture; the image of feminist activists in popular culture.

The present issue of *Popular Inquiry* on the topic “Popular Culture and Feminism” is basically structured in two parts: Articles and Interviews. The first part of the volume includes

six articles by likewise authors, characterized by different backgrounds and research fields but animated by the same interest in contemporary culture and, above all, the same belief in the decisive importance of feminist questions, debates and struggles today. This part of the volume includes the original articles written by Federica Muzzarelli, Danae Ioannou, Stefano Marino, Abigail Klassen and Maria Grazia Turri: while the first four articles are specifically focused on the relation between feminism and certain arts, practices and experiences that belong to the field of popular culture broadly understood (respectively: photography, fashion, pop-rock music), the last two essays are more particularly focused on the question of asexuality and the importance of the recognition of its status in current debates, and finally on the significant role played by the human virtue of kindness for a critical rethinking of human culture and of feminism itself. The second part of our volume includes three interviews, realized by researchers in philosophy and human sciences (Valentina Antoniol, Chiara Tessariol, Anna Preti and Francesca Todeschini), with some distinguished scholars of philosophy, politics, art and fashion (Marina Calloni, Eugenia Paulicelli, Federica Muzzarelli) apropos of their views on feminism and on the role that contemporary culture can play to support the emancipation of women and, more generally, of *all* the subjectivities that have suffered and still suffer from patriarchal and gender-based oppression, discrimination and violence.

It may seem that the contemporary world has become familiar with feminism, that feminist ideas have penetrated deeply into universal consciousness and spread through popular culture, but we believe that there is still a lot of work to be done. Moreover, we believe that philosophy and cultural studies can significantly contribute to the growth of social awareness and a real change in people's attitudes and behavior. No change and emancipation are possible without changing one's mind. No matter how simple or banal it may sound, we believe that promoting a radical change in thinking, discourses and spreading ideas is one of the most important challenges of modern societies. This is the role of philosophy, which initiates changes and questions, and stimulates thinking and critical reflection about the world. However, we are also aware that philosophy alone is not enough today. Hence the interdisciplinary approach to feminist issues proposed in this volume takes into account contemporary popular culture. It is popular culture that has the greatest impact on mass reception. We are all immersed in mass culture today. Popular content reaches us all the time through the media, the Internet, advertisements and publications. Therefore, in working at this issue of *Popular Inquiry* we thought that a reflection on the relation between feminism, philosophy and popular culture can be creative and reveal new contents and ideas that are needed today to support feminist ideals of inclusiveness and equality, regardless of gender, orientation, race, ethnicity, class or age, to finally become a tangible reality.