
POSTFEMINISM, POST-ROMANTIC AND NEW PATTERNS OF FEMINITY IN POPULAR CULTURE

Zuzana Slušná*

Comenius University, Faculty of Arts, Gondova 2, P.O. Box 32, 814 99 Bratislava, Slovak Republic

(Received 8 July 2015, revised 25 August 2015)

Abstract

The aim of this article is to interpret and analyze patterns of femininity in contemporary pop culture. Among pop-cultural bestsellers, the subgenres derived from romantic novels penetrate into the mainstream with the most surprising dynamics and velocity. Many of these have shifted the limits of the perception of romantic by transcending its boundaries towards eroticism, thus gaining the attention and attracting the interest of the mainstream recipients. Many publicly propagated and presented commodities openly tend towards pornography and deepen the tabloidization of the cultural space. The audience has been fascinated by the presented violence and unmasked 'detabooization' of sexuality. The aim of this paper is to analyze the selected parameters of non-elite formulas and their pervasion to the realm of everydayness on selected pop-cultural phenomena. These reflections are based on the observation of the sociologist Miroslav Petrušek, who considers the pop-cultural bestseller to be the most accurate symbolic representation of the liquidity of modernity.

Keywords: pop culture, mainstream recipient, cultural patterns, post-feminism

1. Introduction

Among pop-cultural production, the subgenres derived from romantic novels penetrate into the mainstream with the most surprising dynamics and velocity. One of the subgenres has become known as paranormal *urban fantasy* romance in our literary environment. Paranormal fantasy novels for women are defined as a specific type of both sub-genre and cross-genre. The basic traits of the genre include the radicalized mixing of love, sex and romance, complemented with other attractive sensory attributes: the paranormal and the 'jungle' of a city. Many products from this spectrum of the contemporary consumerist culture belong among those commodities which the author of the *I love Lady Porn* blog, as well as her readers, calls *lady porn*.

*E-mail: slusna@fphil.uniba.sk

2. Reading as a part of consumerism

Reading is an important cultural, social and intellectual activity: it is a self-regulated behaviour carried out by the reader who is also a part of a social system. The performative field of reading as of a culturally and socially conditioned activity is exercised within two spaces: the reading community and the space of an individual. It is an institutionalized, ritualized and socially highly acclaimed activity. On the one hand, it belongs among the established activities appreciated by the society with a high rate of added 'cultural' value, which used to be a status marker in the past. Reading itself, as well as its performance, is both a processual and a culturally-constructed phenomenon: it is subject to change; the formulas of acting and performing the activity are equally variable as culture itself. Reading has become a natural cultural activity, as we read virtually anywhere: in bed before going to sleep, in waiting rooms, sunbathing on the beach, travelling by public transport (airplane, bus, train, underground), at home at the kitchen table or while watching TV, and even in fitness centres performing certain exercises. At the beginning of the modern era, reading was a rational, contemplative activity, which took place in a quiet private asylum. Currently, the practice of reading in silence is a much rarer phenomenon. Reading has become a complementary activity, filling spare time. Accordingly, the content read has been adapted to the new function of reading. An ever increasing portion of the literary market is occupied by products that do not even pretend to offer any value to the reader any longer. Hana Pravdová [1] (and many other theoreticians) warns about the corrosion and decay of the contemporary media culture (including *Respublica literaria*). The field of literature has come under the continuous pressure of producers of books, it has become a captive of the unpredictable desires of the recipients, and it is in the usurping spotlight of electronic media, while its most significant competitors are other easily consumable leisure temptations (baits). Reducing the sensory experience to the perception of 'pleasant feelings', superficiality and self-indulgence are a part of this transformation of the cultural and social environment. It is linked to the narcissistic – hedonistic lifestyle and to the forming of the so-called 'clip culture', within which the superficially prying and cheesy visual aspect often obscures the sensory emptiness. As Vlastimil Zuska critically summarizes, the reduction of the recipient to a consumer is accompanied by the resignation on the perception of complex structures and configurations, the stagnation of the synthetic and analytic abilities, as well as the atrophy of the sense for aesthetic values [2]. Even though the new audience is more educated than the previous generations, it cannot assume a critical stance towards the content offered and is subject to persuasive strategies. The new audience rejects canons, often also boundaries of genres - an example is the transformation of the literature for women and the transformation of reading preferences of female readers.

3. From boudoir literature to porn for ladies

A part of the process of the transformation of reading as of an activity with added cultural value was the desecration of books and the profanation of reading. The modern times bring about an intensive ‘domestication’ of books and reading. In case of reading, the conventional, optimal, normative and institutionalized performance of the activity fundamentally changed. In modern age, it was established as an accepted form of social play, yet the rituals linked to its performance strengthened the symbolic boundaries between the ‘male’ world – represented by the library – and the ‘female’ – represented by the boudoir. Among others, Suellen Diaconoff points out the practical functioning of this cultural opposition [3]. The literary heritage of Marie Antoinette was classified as books belonging to a library (on religion, History, Science and art, as well as high literature) and books belonging to a boudoir. The boudoir was not a semantically neutral space: it symbolized the private realm dominated by the female principle. It archetypally represented female phenomena, which were marginalized by the modern rational discourse as extra-rational: emotions, sentiments, dreams, delight and female sexuality.

‘Boudoir reading’ connoted products of low social value intended for women who did not care about their reputation, as it encouraged its readers to act and behave in a manner challenging the formulas of acceptable femininity. In his analyses, Roger Chartier pointed out the cultural establishment of the negative connotations of ‘boudoir reading’, foremost its cultural and social stigmatization [4]. While the visual representations of reading men present reading as a contemplative activity of reason, the representations of reading women depict reading as an irrational state of female mind, such as joy. Reading in boudoirs symbolized more than the act of reading itself (as of a cultural activity), it also represented its content: emotionally non-rationalized acts of passion, while the complex connotations are amplified by the scenic arrangement of reading women into private ‘womanly frivolous’ spaces, while some representations also demonstrate signs of sexual excitement of reading women.

The stigmatization of ‘boudoir reading’ is inherent to the stereotypical perception of the so-called reading for women that lasted up to the 20th century. The literary field was divided by sharp demarcation lines not only to high, mass and low, but also to the realm of ‘male’ and ‘female’. Novels for women intended to be read in boudoirs and situated as a part of trash literature were rid of any potential value, as *trash is always worthless and detrimental*. Literal theorist Ondrej Sirovátka even distinguished two basic (cultural) realms in literary trash: the realm of acts, occupied by the taste of male readers, and the realm of sentiment, which was reserved for women [5]. The novels and novelettes, in which the romantic dominates as the category of expression, became the ‘objects’ of the frivolous, non-intellectual and banal products. The connotative ties to ‘boudoir’, frivolous and sensually exciting reading are also

highlighted by the labelling attributed to romantic stories for women in our cultural environment – the so-called red library.

According to the analyses of Janice A. Radway, we pointed out the functions fulfilled by the romantic stories (including ‘boudoir reading’) in the cultural system. They formulate, strengthen and reproduce the formulas of idealized patriarchal relationships in a heterosexual couple consisting of an active man – a hero – and a passive woman awaiting rescue [6]. Lisa Fletcher also exploited the perspective of cultural criticism in her reflection of historic forms of romantic stories for women. She sees romantic novelettes as key media for propagating institutionalized and desired social formulas, foremost of the heteronormative relational matrix, the formula for family structure, as well as the ideal demonstration of the gender roles expected by the society [7]. Romantic stories do not act only as hegemonic/coercive structures, but also as a specific type of cultural code that is open to interpretation and also sensitively reacts to socio-cultural context. The narratives have the form of a text, a structure tied and intertwined not only internally (intratextual relationships), but also towards the ambient extralinguistic context (intertextual relationships). Texts do not only represent reality, but they also participate in the movement of reality, in its dynamic transformation.

The formulas of acting presented as a part of the consumerist pop-culture do not force their audience to assume attitudes or value judgements. By being situated in the semantic space ‘between’ the canon of high literature and trash literature, the romantic stories for women participated in the formation of the zone of contact through which the intertextual, as well as intermediary dialogue between canon of the ‘high’, feminism and the expectations of the female readers was executed, which freed the discourse initiated by the postmodern from axiological and aesthetic ‘supervision’. In contrast to the first stage of modernity, in the second stage (and the second individualist revolution), women demanding an opportunity for individual choice are becoming much more prominent actors. As Anthony Giddens reminds, the second stage of modernity has brought about the ‘rise of intimacy’, accentuating the importance of emotional and personal relationships [8].

Literature for women reacted fairly quickly and flexibly to this social change by offering a new type of a female hero who prefers the projection and production of her own reflexive ‘me’ to the fulfilment of her role as of a mother. The strong and liberated woman, who produces, constructs and presents herself as an able manager of the project of her own life, has transpired from alternative genres to the more widely accepted mainstream. In addition to her happy and satisfied family and an own professional career, the basis for the social acceptance of her *self as a project* and foremost the acknowledgement of the qualitative attribute of ‘success’ is her own so-called plastic sexuality freed from the need for procreation [8, p. 147].

The woman is not threatened only by the reflexive project of her own body, but also by her own plastic sexuality, and remains threatened by the risk of the unavoidability of biological reproduction. Just as the awareness of the right

of a more perfect body was shaped in postmodernism, in the context of second modernity, the awareness of the right for sexual happiness and satisfaction is developed. This statement conforms to the definition of sexual health stipulated by the World Health Organization (WHO) which conceptualizes reproduction as a subset of sexuality. Love referring to the emotional fulfilment with adequate sex life and (the degree of) achieved satisfaction has become the placeholder for the current cultural situation.

The commercial success of the new types of commodities for women represented by E.L. James's trilogy *Fifty shades of...* and their appreciation by the readers are an expressive example of the change of discourse. With respect to the target group of recipients, it has been labelled *Mommy porn*. The statistics available show that more than 100 million books have been distributed around the globe, while the marketing success of the series has stemmed from a new type of viral marketing and foremost from a new type of reading (eBooks). This acclaimed product brand is represented not only by movies, but also by a line of erotic instruments and clothing.

While the current literary market offers products alluring recipients by more explicit sexual scenes including tabooed or marginalized practices, E.L. James's book is classified as *romance* in bookstores and shops, thus its production is socially accepted and is intended for common public reading. The presentation of the translation in print in the Slovak (and Czech) literary market, as well as the opening of the adaptation to film during Saint Valentine's Day were a pompous public *performance* in the form of a prestigious social *event* [9]. In reaction to the success of the novel, Aaron Stanton developed a comparative in-depth analysis for Digital Publishing News suggesting that the book contains 98.54% more sexually explicit content than romantic novels respecting the canon, but also 70.38% less sexually explicit content than novelettes classified as erotic [A. Stanton, *Is Fifty Shades of Grey Literally Making Romance Sexier?*, Digital Publishing News for 21st century, 22 March 2015, <http://www.digitalbookworld.com/2013/did-fifty-shades-of-grey-shift-the-line-between-romance-and-erotica/>]. The commercial success of the new type of commodities transcending the boundaries between the romantic, erotic and pornographic with mainstream recipients is accompanied by the interest of the audience in products which Tracie Lampe called *Lady-porn*. She started her blog *I love lady porn ebooks!* on August 30, 2012 in reaction to her 'discovery' of E. L. James's novel *Fifty shades of grey*. She thematically defined her blog, which has become a virtual place for promoting books and authors and the discussion with readers, as "Some delicious, female-friendly and sex-positive erotic romance"... "For women that goes beyond 50 Shades" [T. Lampe, *I love Lady Porn*, 22 March 2015, <http://iloveladyporn.blogspot.com>].

From the aesthetic perspective, the 'romantic' is a key part of many narrations. At the same time, it is a culturally and socially determined ('constructed') quality of expression and it is an object of symbolic and semantic concretization on the part of the author, as well as of the recipients of the work. The active construction of the 'romantic', in the words of Stuart Hall, its *coding*

and decoding, is executed on the basis of both emotional and rational impressions acquired through reception. The products labelled as *lady porn*, which are simultaneously presented as a part of the mainstream romantic literature, are unique in their expression, as well as in their reduction of *fabula*. Fabula, as a complete and chronological *sujet* constructed by the recipient in interaction with the narrative scheme, represents the result of a collective sensual process. In the new type of literature for women, the role of explicit eroticism is no longer to sharpen narration, rather it is becoming an expressive and fabulative dominant, towards which the perceptive-cognitive activity of the recipients is steered (or even on which it is focused).

4. Eternal love as a conceptual hope for post-feminists

Intermediary and intertextual links between a socio-cultural context and its pop-cultural representations initiated multiple key innovations in the romantic subgenres in the second half of the 20th century. Since the early 1990's, a new type of heroines has been appearing in pop-cultural romantic stories: an 'action super-chick' who, paraphrasing Janice Radway, became the new conceptual hope for readers of romantic stories for women. In contrast to women waiting to be saved from all the dangers of society and the world by their 'idealized opposite', these 'action chicks' are self-sufficient professionals, who do not need a male counterpart as a rescuer and saviour, as they can substitute him in many basic gender roles perfectly well. Women manifesting and demonstrating strength, creativity and aggression induce optimism at first sight as model examples of the deconstruction of traditional gender stereotypes. Although they criticize the 'logic' of gender binarism through their acts in certain situations, there have only been shallow, as if 'external', changes in the formula itself: even this 'action chick' remains pleasantly female in her routine habits. The growing popularity of such subgenres within the genre of romantic stories for women which are – in compliance with the canon of the so-called *literature for women* – constructed in accordance with the expectations and conventions of traditional or more conservative formulas is related to the establishment of post-feminism as a new cultural situation following the era of feminism.

Post-feminism become new cultural situation tied to the production of a new type of cultural products which are linked to the post-feminist generational logic. The 'generational logic' of post-feminism draws on the cultural and social climate which is stigmatized by mainstream media, consumerist culture and consumerism, neoliberal politics, individualism, as well as by postmodernism and feminism. The 'domestication' of feminism and the diffusion of its principles and theses into the cultural and social context of the mainstream society are accompanied by the accentuation of selected elements of feminism, which are used as marketing tools supporting the sales of products for girls and women.

The protagonist is represented as an 'ordinary woman', thus she is not a 'superwoman' at the first glance. The formula of superwoman-ness is constructed, completed (often with a substantial reliance on the feedback from fans) and even changed in the narration. Superwoman heroines represent *new femininity*; they do not suppress their aggression and they sweep along the 'typically' male world as respected professionals. Many contemporary subgenres allow the stories to be set in fictional worlds, in which the female heroine can not only manifest her sexuality, but also kill. Killing and violence is masked as legally justifiable, lawful, as both culturally and socially legitimate. In addition to the right to bear arms, an important attribute of *new femininity* is the physical build-up and the related physical attractiveness. Typologically, heroines – superwomen belong to *action chicks* which have been gradually winning recognition in mainstream popular culture since the second half of the 20th century [6].

The 'perfect woman' is a hardly attainable cultural ideal. At the same time, it is one of the most dominant coercive 'products' for women of the X and Y generations. The perfect woman is one who *has it all*: work accompanied by an influential position, as well as a heteronormative family most often complemented by two children and a supportive husband. Christine Scharf states that the current young generation is in a situation comparable to the situation in which German women found themselves in the 1920's. They are young, attractive, satisfied, with many possibilities and benefits. They hedonistically enjoy the benefits and liberties fought for and achieved by the previous generation of actresses of the public and social life. They prefer individualized interests to collective and public activities, they exploit the opportunities to appease their needs (including sexual ones) and they are more tolerant towards patriarchal formulas than the previous generation [10]. The formulas of *new femininity* are based on the critical reflection on feminism as an anti-female movement: Christina Scharf accentuates that critical objections of the representatives of the X and Y generation against feminism are often based on the stereotypical medial representations of feminists as anti-women, masculinists or lesbians [10].

The narrative on the relationship of a romantic couple remains the basic line of romantic stories, yet in the new cultural situation, this narrative acquired the form of a spectacular story. It follows the motive of a *quest* of seeking eternal love. On the background of thrilling and tense situations, the heroine is searching for her idealized counterpart, so that she could fulfil her destiny and call her life project successful. Ondrej Mészáros considers unpredictability, being cast into time, seriality and linking to an individual to be the basic ontic characteristics of contemporary love [11]. Love has been transformed into an empirically experienceable bliss; it has become felt and sensed. Love is free from morality, virtue or social responsibility, but offers joy, satisfaction, pleasure and delight. According to Ondrej Mészáros, the saddest argument of modern love is that love has been locked in time: people desire an eternal, lasting love, even though they know that it can only be temporary [11]. Love is

an egoistic sensual desire and – just as any other desire – it vanishes in the moment of its fulfilment. The time of love has been reduced to a moment, an extradimensional sexual act, which finds its fulfilment in pleasure. By locking love into pleasure, pleasure gained superiority over love. This is manifested through the blurring of the boundaries between love, eroticism and pornography; and this trend can be observed not only in visual culture, but also in literature (as evidenced by the discourse on the contemporary ‘romantic’ novels for women. As Erika Moravčíková suggests, the human subject is the highest moral authority of today [12].

On the background of the material offered by these narrations, the readers analyse their own acts, values and beliefs. Love is a cultural construct and the binary opposition of suitable and unsuitable performances of love is practically a culturally conditioned cliché. In the second wave of individualism, a person needs to learn the new rules of the game of love, which has become a social fashion, as well as an important part of the *performance* of one’s happiness and achieved success. In reference to the thesis of Ulrich Beck, Ivan Chorváth states that the belief in love and intimacy is a new secular religion of the people of today [13].

The functions of the subgenre of romantic literature do not include *mimesis* of reality but to offer what is the basis of a successful romantic story: the myth of eternal love. In case of popcultural romantic literature, ‘content’ is subordinated to the institutionalized influence of the norms of the genre and the expectations of the recipients. The stories which are based on proven topical motives of the myth of eternal love (they only actualize it by setting it into a new type of fictional world or through new, paranormal abilities of the protagonists) are much more successful than narrations that actualize (ironize or violate) the codified norm. The identification of the parameters of a satisfying, ideally eternal and harmonic, relationship with well-balanced intimacy and sexuality which is fulfilling for both parties can be seen as the central *quest* of romantic stories. Daniela Hodrová considers the didactic exemplariness of acting an important trait of narrative structures unwinding on the background of the performance of the *quest* [14]. The formulas of the ostentatious exercising of love are not the only elements of romantic novels for women. The explicit descriptions of an active and in every manner satisfying fulfilment of a relationship have become a refreshing element for the readers (and even an expected part of narration in many contemporary commodities).

The performance of the heroine’s *quest* of looking for love is free of a metaphysical depth and the basic esoteric and mystic elements are desacralized and, through the predecessors of the genre (which, according to Hodrová, include the decadent novel of initiation), is rid of contextual ties to the myths of initiation [14, p. 89-114]. Even though its function is not of a model ethic normative and the (potential) etalons of ethics and value serve only as a backdrop for the story rather than a paradigm encouraging a (collective) *mimesis*, they are unquestionable elements of prosthetic memory.

The basis for this is the change of ways in which cultural and social formulas are adopted which we are facing today. We 'suck in' much information from a huge reservoir of cultural information. Prosthetic memory is based on memories and information that a person has not experienced personally, but one implemented them from other narrations, symbols or various visual representations circulating in current culture. The 'myth' of a romantic love of a heterosexual couple is one of the best functioning and most stable culturally stereotyped images and it is participating in the strengthening and survival of the institution of normative heterosexuality. The eternal and undying romantic love of a heterosexual couple represents an unchanging and unquestionable value even in a world of liquid modernity and its flexional 'me'. Even though the action (super-)woman penetrated into male domains, the resistance of a stereotypical interpretation of the 'female' remains present in other details.

5. Conclusions

The current romantic literature for women, which is accepted by the mainstream, has become a medial space in which the brutalization of culture, as well as sophisticated persuasive strategies of demanding the attention of the recipients can be observed. The literary commodities lure the readers by attractive (super-)woman models. The new context for female pop-cultural heroines is the result of the new cultural situation which can be defined through some basic parameters.

In the post-romantic situation, experiencing love is subordinated to experiencing sexuality and sexual identity. Motives or ways of portrayal aimed at achieving excitement are set apart from the wider context. In narratives, the graphic, explicit and 'realistic' depiction of sexual acts is equally important as metaphoric suggesting of sensuality. Love is not only experienced, but also practiced. On the level of expression, the formulas of practicing are obscene and ostentatious. Popcultural romance participate in the creation of the prosthetic formula of a 'perfect love act', which no longer conveys only the emotional dimension presented through words, touching, embracing, but also the physical act (the description of penetration itself). The boundaries of what not so long ago used to be declared socially and culturally perverse are being crushed. While many narrations transcend the boundaries between romantic, erotic and pornographic on the level of expression, on the topical level, products constructed in line with the expectations and conventions, in other words, products built on stereotypical or conservative formulas, continue to be the most popular bestsellers and the most positively received works with mainstream recipients. The current post-feminist cultural situation is a fertile soil for strengthening the stereotype of an eternal undying love of a heterosexual couple. The reconstruction or even relativization of certain formulas in its culturally accepted manifestations: the promiscuity of protagonists, the detabooization of pleasure as a sensory experience, the transcendence of the boundaries of the

genre towards pornography or a depiction on the boundary of pornographic experience.

Acknowledgement

The results presented in this study were obtained under the support the Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava No. 27/2015 *Popculture as Part of Lived Culture*.

References

- [1] H. Pravdová and J. Radošinská, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **9(6)** (2013) 169–178.
- [2] V. Zuska, *Estetika. Úvod do súčasnosti tradičnej disciplíny (Aesthetic. Introduction into Present Moment of Traditional Discipline)*, Triton, Praha, 2001, 125.
- [3] S. Diaconoff, *Through the Reading Glass: Women, Books, and Sex in the French Enlightenment*, State University of New York, New York, 2005, 14-23.
- [4] R. Chartier, *Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France*, in *Understanding Popular Culture. Europe from Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, S. Kaplan (ed.), Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2012, 229-254.
- [5] O. Sirovátka, *Ach, tá láska. Oh, that love!*, Melantrich, Praha, 1984, 14.
- [6] Z. Slušná, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **10(Suppl. 1)** (2014) 99-110.
- [7] L. Fletcher, *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity*, Ashgate, Burlington, 2008.
- [8] A. Giddens, *Proměna intimacy. Sexualita, láska a erotika v moderných společnostech (The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies)*, Portál, Praha, 2012, 37-48.
- [9] Z. Slušná, *Čítanie v kontexte kultúry konzumovania: „ženské“ popkultúrne artefakty a akivity*, in *Minority v subsystéme kultúry (Minority in Subsystem of Culture)*, M. Ballay (ed.), UKF, Nitra, 2014, 367-376.
- [10] S. Scharf, *Repudiating Feminism. Young Women in Neoliberal World*. Ashgate, London, 2012, 69-88.
- [11] O. Mészáros, *Kritika a context*, **34** (2007) 109-116.
- [12] E. Moravčíková, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **10(Suppl. 1)** (2014) 61-70.
- [13] I. Chorváth, *Sociální studia*, **4** (2009) 25-42.
- [14] D. Hodrová, *Román zasvěcení. Novel of Initiation*, 2nd edn., Malvern, Praha, 2014.