

Keeping the Door Open ...

Interview with Angela McRobbie by E/J González Polledo,
Maria José Belbel and Rosa Reitsamer.

Angela McRobbie, Professor of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths College (University of London), is one of the most interesting thinkers on popular culture, contemporary media practices and feminism. Her work of almost four decades, linked to Stuart Hall and the British sociologists of the school of Birmingham in its inception, develops a theoretical genealogy from the traditions of Feminism and Marxism. McRobbie doesn't call herself a philosopher, but her methodology is NOT that of a strict empiricist: looking at girl's magazines, music, art and the media she opens new contexts of theoretical and political relevance, which she then puts to dialogue with feminist work of different affiliations (Braidotti's nomadic subjects, Butler's queer and Spivak's postcolonial subaltern) and with other theoretical and political approaches to popular culture and social change (Bhabha, Bordieu, Gilroy, Hardt, Jameson, to name but a few).

Angela McRobbie's text on popular music and feminism, *Rock and Sexuality*, written in collaboration with Simon Frith in 1978, was a pioneer essay on the patriarchal character of rock, and her publication constituted a starting point for numerous studies on popular music. In 1980, she published the article *Settling Accounts with Subculture. A Feminist Critique*, in which she questioned the absence of female subcultures in the influent work of Dick Hebdige *Subculture. The Social Meaning of Style*, 1979, and pointed out that any research that intended to

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understand the construction of meanings on juvenile subcultures, had to consider the private sphere of domesticity as much as the public scene, at a time in which the access of girls to mobility and public spaces was much smaller for them than for boys. Both articles are published in the classic compilation *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, edited by Simon Frith and Andrea Goodwin in 1990. It is also important to mention her essay *Shut Up and Dance: Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity* (1993) in which she analyses the paradoxes of young women identifications with feminism. Other works include *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (1994); *British Fashion Design* (1998), *In the Culture Society: Art, Fashion and Popular Music* (1999) in which she discusses the development of artistic and cultural practices in contemporary consumer society, and the aestheticization of every day life in Britain. Recently, she edited with Paul Gilroy and Lawrence Grossberg: *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, (2000), and in 2005 published *The Uses of Cultural Studies* (Sage). In *The Uses of Cultural Studies* (now translated into two Chinese Editions) McRobbie both explicates the key writing of theorists like Butler, Hall and Gilroy but also adds her own distinctive critique while also stretching these theoretical worlds so that they connect with grounded processes of cultural and artistic production. Her new book *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* is published in November 2008, and is currently being translated into German.

McRobbie's work also resides in other processes, such as the promotion of much needed intergenerational debate as a politics of translation, an intense curiosity for learning from the new, an immense pedagogical dedication,

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an effort for writing in clear yet complex ways so she can be widely read. Using her own words one could call it a passionate work: rethinking feminism in contemporary terms, working to locate what constitutes the political in the present, which remain unavoidable tasks in order to continue to develop the feminist project as an emancipatory practice.

Q: Your new book *The Aftermaths of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (SAGE) will come out in November 2008. Which main issues and arguments do you discuss in the book?

Angela McRobbie: My book is very much about how feminism has been undone in the last twenty years and it's about a kind of inexorable process of undoing. I take the notion of articulation and turn it upside down, so it's actually disarticulation. But this disarticulation is carried out alongside and is subsumed by a seemingly more popular discourse of choice, empowerment and freedom. This 'false-feminist-inflected-freedom' is instrumentalized first by commercial culture but then through governmentality in order to actually bring feminism to an end. That is really the argument in my book. That there is a much more complex process than it appears. So that is why I use this notion of taking feminism into account in order to propose it is not longer needed, that it is a thing of the past. So that's why I'm arguing that then feminism is reduced to this kind of spectre or haunting presence but actually what I say at the very end of the book is that feminism is alive in its own way in the academy. And something interesting has gone on there, when in every university you go to in Europe is incredibly dynamic, very active young women, young black

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women who would identify as feminists or queer and they are incredibly passionate about feminism. So in the last chapter I try and work out what's going on there in relation to the feminist academy and what I do is challenge those versions of contemporary feminism which are more upbeat, more into kind of positivity. In the first part I engage with this European mainstreaming discourse which you are probably very familiar with because it is the dominant discourse in Europe and the UK. I connect gender mainstreaming with UK governmentality and have a go at gender mainstreaming and then in the second part I have a real go at third wave sort of girls. And even though again there is a lot of stuff on the internet that is more critical actually there is a very celebratory and really pro commercial culture discourse. They publish me alongside these people and it drives me a bit mad. There is this book called All About the Girl where I start off with an introduction that is incredibly critical and everybody else in the book are like 'oh, it's great that we can go out shopping', so I really have a go at them, but then in section three I engage with Rosi Braidotti and I look at Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti together, and I ask the question, which is more a sociological question rather than a philosophical question which is the institutional question of how do young women get from A to Braidotti's B. So what is the step that has to be taken to be moved into this space of creative self dynamic or inventiveness. Braidotti talks a lot about inventiveness and she uses the Deleuzian vocabulary of inventiveness. I just simply ask this basic question, and it's obviously nomadic becomings. How do you get institutionally to a place that might not be able to access this subjective-becomings position without difficulty. So I ask her to

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explain that process and I kind of answer that question by going back to Cultural Studies and saying well, if most of these becomings now take place in semi-institutionalized, state subsidized sectors of the arts or EU subsidized projects or education, then we have to look at those processes of access and where they continue to exist or where they are being stopped. So I kind of end up with this space of the university and go back to Cultural Studies' earlier debates... to Raymond Williams, actually about access and about extramural education and what do people need in order to be able to get into those spaces of becoming. I made the connection, and I use Gayatri Spivak's work, and ask what is it to be, if one could say there are all these nomadic becomings, of course, if you take migrant literature, how does the migrant get to be someone who is able to write?

Q: There is this idea of nomadic becoming and on the other hand there is this question of access. How do you think these two positions relate to each other when you look at creative industries?

Angela McRobbie: I think it is a misunderstanding to see the new creative industries as elitist or as a place of middle class and largely white activity. That's really too fast conclusion to come to. What one's really got to do is to break down and understand the process whereby the process is coming through non-elite universities and also in the UK the government is putting huge amounts of money into performing arts and media at school level. So one question which I thought you were asking is about access to creative industries. Superficially it can be seen as a kind of white boys' club, but actually I think that is very much the result of a certain kind of limited

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research that is being done. And because there hasn't been enough grounded, empirical research, it's been assumed if you hang out or if you go to things like cultural entrepreneurs' club that was kind of white boys' that was self-defined as cutting edge and much closer to corporate. It was the intersection of corporate and free-lance small, micro economies, particularly in media. But if one takes a kind of longer term look, and if you look at the relation between cultural policy and educational policy and casual arts creative sector in the majority of cities, then you will find that it's not this homogenous group. It's just because people haven't gone out doing these interviews with DJs or with young black people. Nobody has looked at what are the occupations and the careers of young black musicians in London. Nobody's done that. And a feminist critique of creative industries is long overdue really.

Q: It seems that queer communities are at this stage receiving and developing work that explores experience from a processual perspective. It is in this way that new analyses, influenced by poststructuralist theory and also by revisions of biology and neuroscience, are privileging notions of flow, becoming and process over identity categories, and even over 'intersectional' paradigms. Shifting the unit of analysis from semiotic-material to notions of becoming and effect, these analyses are in some ways creating a hierarchy by privileging 'post-identity' and non-belonging in feminist theory and politics, as it was developed under the influence of socialism and marxism. In this context, how do you see the future of the intersection between feminism and queer?

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Angela McRobbie: Well I agree with you that intersectional theory is too rigid, too much a matter of blocks of this merging with blocks of that. I can see that queer is a more encompassing and more fluid title to go with if one is a gender activist who finds older feminism over-defined by a vocabulary which is nowadays less relevant e.g. maternity, the critique of 'patriarchy' etc., and I also think that queer politics provides the possibility for a renewed sexual radicalism, for sure. But I also mourn the loss of feminism as it connected with lesbian and gay politics, I mourn the loss of men being forced to work in the creche, and the spaces of commonality which existed between feminist single parents and lesbian mothers also. When and if queer displaces feminism, the question is who or what is left behind? I also mourn the loss of some of those voices which were so vocal within 'socialist-feminism' through the 1980s and early 1990s, and the foregrounding also of feminist psychoanalysis. That too has been subsumed within Deleuze and Guattari's anti-oedipus, but I am left wondering if there can be a more public and not just a specialist place for the feminist politics of psychoanalysis. Actually I try to do this (I maybe do not succeed) in Chapter 4 of my new book which is titled *Illegible Rage: Young Women's Post-Feminist Disorders*, and actually a short version is already published in Italian in the current issue of *Studi Culturali*. But I would like to see more inter-generational debates on questions like, what happened to the politics of desire? Or even a look back at books like Mary McIntosh and Michelle Barratt's *Anti-Social Family*.

Q: And how do you envision that?

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Angela McRobbie: I think it's quite problematic because most people from my generation aren't interested in doing that anymore. Let us say Mary McIntosh and Michele Barrett. Their work was incredibly important, and when you talked about intergenerational dialogue, I would like to say that, I get my students to read that, and they are amazed when they do read it. But, fair enough Mary McIntosh is now retired and campaigns on 'help the aged', and Michele Barrett, she is maybe five years older than me and her work is in a completely new and different space. She is writing about the First World War. And why should she be concerned to make these connections? Maybe it is my problem. In Cultural Studies and under the influence of Stuart Hall, there always was that inter-generational possibility through Stuart's connection with Black Arts with Isaac Julien, Kobena Mercer, and so many others.

Q: I think about the limits of this discourse of 'becoming' in relation to political traditions like socialist feminism or Marxism. But I was wondering how did you see that in relation to the future...

Angela McRobbie: I think there was a long moment where Cultural Studies and politics were quite comfortably interactive and productive without having to abandon the value of theory. And again people like Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Stuart Hall, Jacqueline Rose, even though she is not a Cultural Studies person... I think the cut off point is what constitutes the political, because the kind of mainstream political that Stuart Hall used to engage with, the British political establishment or political culture in Britain, the proximity to questions of governance or think tanks or having a shape, having a

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voice, an impact on the critique of New Labour, I think that's really finished. I think that's a hopeless case. There are other kinds of politics now that I just think: the way in which there was a kind of relationship between British Cultural Studies, the British State, the critique of that truism, the critique of New Labour, that kind of insider political institutionalized; I just think forget that. I actually think it's precisely because it's a kind of dead space now, even though lots of people ever so often do try to intervene in that but it's actually not a productive space to intervene in. It's actually the university and certain kinds of politics that actually do emerge and the certain kinds of politics that Judith Butler is involved in. I think that's so much more productive. But then the question is, let's say all the work around the war or around the critique of Bush and notions of precariousness and Guantánamo, and let's say Jaqueline Rose's work on Israel, of course you can't predict in any way what kind of impact it has. It's open ended in terms of how it works. What is the political and maybe the political are just again events and encounters; then, those events and encounters are closer to the university now than they used to be. They are not in the EU or on its intellectual and political agenda.

Q: How do you think about your articles on music such as *Rock and Sexuality*, *Settling Accounts on Subcultures*. *A Feminist Critique*, in relation to politics and subcultures? How do you see this work in perspective?

Angela McRobbie: That's an interesting question. I have to think about it. I feel okay about it if it's put in the context of early Cultural Studies. I didn't want to carry on thinking about subcultures after a certain

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point, obviously you don't want to carry on with the same work. So I think the bits of my early work that I'm okay about are the stuff on Jackie magazine and I feel fine with the critique of the boys at Birmingham on rock, sexuality and subcultures, and I feel fine about Second-Hand Dresses and the Role of the Ragmarket. I think what that did was that shifted the attention away from subcultures as just like experience to subcultures as economies of productions.

What I feel much less comfortable with to be honest, and this is again a more complicated question, because I think the Birmingham emphasis on class was important at the time and of course had to be displaced by race, gender and sexuality. But I never felt comfortable inside a culturalist perspective on working class because it wasn't my experience. I can see now that if you were coming from a structuralist perspective, class was a category you could interrogate from a different perspective but there was a kind of romanticism around class. It does make sense when I think about it: Why did I feel that I had to think about working class girls? And that came from a kind of socialist feminist critique which went like, right, if you are thinking about young people, you shouldn't really be thinking about middle class young women because they are already privileged. The limits of sociology at that time or the intersection of Cultural Studies and sociology at that time was that, if you were thinking about the social groups that you were engaging with, you either had to think about that in terms of middle class or working class and to opt for middle class girls would have implied that it would be narrow. But the adverse of that is that there was an under-theorised relationship with the working class people, girls that you were engaging with. I can see now

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that Paul Willis could do absolutely within his own competence and his own biography. I think I always felt uncomfortable, and actually I think that subcultures then solved that because subcultures themselves were such a class mix and race mix. And there was another piece that I still feel okay about called The Politics of Feminist Research, that was in an early issue of Feminist Review, 1981. But I really don't like the idea of that work being used as though it has contemporary relevance, it only has historical relevance.

Thank you for the interview.