

Reflection statement

My Major Work compares the 1970's novel *Puberty Blues* by Kathy Lette and Gabrielle Carey to the 2012 television production of the same name, as the mechanism for exploring the transitions in critical approaches to texts from structuralism to post structuralism. The central question posed in my work concerns the relationship of texts and values: does the television drama commodify and aestheticise the novel's social realism and specifically its representation of gender politics, in a way that drains the text of its social critique?

My imagined audience are culturally literate, but not necessarily academic readers who have some familiarity with the critical perspectives that frame my work. My work assumes a prior knowledge of the texts. Its ideal audience would be one that is sufficiently aware of Australian social history to place both texts in the context in which they were composed and to which they respond.

This work is an extension and application of particular postmodern theoretical perspectives encountered in the *Textual Dynamics* elective of the *Language and Values* module in the English Extension I course. My work seeks to frame the texts in relation to particular theorists in ways that illuminate how the texts express particular cultural values and how audiences might value them. It is also an extension of the premise that underpins the *Texts in Time* elective of Module A in the Advanced English course that critically compares texts and the ways in which context shapes meaning and influences response.

In tracing the transition of *Puberty Blues* from page to screen, from a 1979 novel of social realism to 2012 television entertainment, my research necessarily involved an encounter with the shift from modernism to post-modernism and the shift in critical fashion from structuralism to post-structuralism. It involved an encounter with the implications of the shift from a feminist reading of texts to a post-feminist perspective that rejected the essentialism of a male/female binary. It involved an encounter with the shift from the aesthetics of realism to the aesthetics of pastiche. It involved the shift from 'the male gaze' to the 'perverse gaze' and what Terry Eagleton, whose general discussion of these critical positions I found invaluable to my thinking, describes as the shift from 'Trotskyism to transgression'. To this end, the main challenge for composing my work was to develop a practical and workable understanding of often dense theoretical work that would allow my analysis of the texts to be intelligible.

While specific theoretical positions are cited within my essay, at its core is the work of Fredric Jameson and his description of the postmodern practice of pastiche. His seminal works *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* (1985) and *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) provide the theoretical framework for my analysis of the television drama. Jameson's much quoted description of pastiche as "blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour" and his critique of "the nostalgia film" and its cultural function in a "schizophrenic" commodity culture that had lost its sense of history provided central orientations for my analysis.

As telling as I found Jameson for exploring a response to the television drama, there was also a very real sense for me as a viewer of that text that

remained unconvinced by the pessimism of Jameson's propositions. While I could always accept that I was a 'consumer' of the text, accept that the text represented social history as pleasurable style and accept how the misogynistic culture it dramatised was often expressed in ways that offered a perverse titillation, I found it hard to accept that this text offered no political possibilities for its audience, or that its status as 'pastiche' consigned it to being a benign commodity in which the social history it expressed could be explained away as 'nostalgia'. As a viewer who considered herself sympathetic to a feminist politics, I still found it compelling. Judith Butler's critique of Jameson and her insistence that pastiche retains a subversive potential in the light of queer strategies for reading texts, alerted me to how the television drama of *Puberty Blues* might be understood less in the context of 1970's feminism, and more in the context of contemporary post-feminist identity politics. I could see how this television entertainment also submits to transgressive readings that offer an appreciation of how the text operates, in Butler's terms, as a kind of '70's drag' show that destabilises assumptions of an essential historical and gender identity. Judith Butler, and specifically her critique of Jameson, provided the other key theoretical basis for my Major Work.

The style of my work adopts a 'serious' academic focus but mediates that focus with a self-referential and personal voice. I refer to myself with the personal pronoun; I refer to my personal experience of the texts in the context of my actual reading or viewing them. I wanted my essay to be about my personal experience of the texts rather than a more detached 'scholarly' analysis. The essays of Terry Eagleton and particularly the English literary

and cultural critic Jenny Diski provided me with models for how this style might operate. But my inclination to do so was more informed by the personal contexts that brought me to *Puberty Blues* in the first place. My mother read the novel when she was my age. I have always been interested in and admired her feminist values. She encouraged me to read the novel and we watched the television drama together. There is a particular poignancy for me that the generational 'gap' between the publication of the novel and the production of the television series is also that between my mother and me. At the risk of seeming sentimental, *Puberty Blues* has offered a kind of bridge to that gap that connected me to the social history of my mother, the context in which her values were formed and the values I have embraced. My response to the texts was informed by that personal context and I wished for that to be reflected in the style and voice of my writing. I hope she enjoys reading it as much as I enjoyed its writing.

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