Book Review/ Compte rendu

McDonnell, Andrea, *Reading Celebrity Gossip Magazines*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2014. 162 pp., $70.95 hardcover (9780745682181)

In USA today as elsewhere, popular culture has become largely interchangeable with celebrity culture. Celebrity gossip magazines stand as a symptom of this. They have been on the rise since the turn of the millennium and they are now synonymous with big business successes. The readers of these publications are mostly females who report that reading these magazines is pleasurable. At the same time, these magazines represent "women's experiences in ways that are stereotypic, narrow-minded and retrograde" (88). Like other feminist researchers before her, Andrea McDonnell sees this combination of elements as politically problematic. Her book is an attempt to probe this phenomenon. The result is certainly interesting, clearly presented and well organized, yet it is not ground-breaking. Undergraduate students will have fun getting their hands on this book (it is definitely recommended for any course on popular culture), but senior scholars might regret its lack of theoretical sophistication.

To untangle the relation between politics and pleasure, McDonnell begins by distinguishing between meaning and practice. Following in the footstep of Janice Radway and Joke Hermes, her position is that, while necessary, textual analysis is not sufficient as research method. The reality at hand doesn't stop with the stories and images printed on the page. It also rests on the ways individuals assimilate these into the particular circumstances of their own lives. Accordingly, for her research work, McDonnell subscribed to five American celebrity gossip magazines for over a period of one year (*Us Weekly*, *Star*, *OK!*, *Life & Style* and *In Touch*); she also interviewed six former and current staff of these magazines and, most importantly, eleven female magazines readers.

McDonnell makes numerous fine observations. To start with, celebrity gossip magazines are designed to create the readers' impression that all belong to one community. There is a similarity between the magazines' content and the readers: the magazines describe the lives of young female stars to their primarily young women readership. At the other end, and somewhat paradoxically, celebrities have

been rebranding themselves in recent years as ordinary persons. To connect with their audiences, celebrities must appear as authentic and genuine. Presenting yourself as ordinary is a strategy to achieve this goal. Again, this reinforces a close relation with the readers for whom the magazines talk as much about the stars as about themselves. Indeed, her interviews reveal that young women find in celebrity gossip magazines material that is relevant to them. This is the first reason why they enjoy reading these publications (80-81). Young women want to read about stars' weddings, babies and break-ups because these are the things that are happening to them or to those around them at this stage of their lives.

But gossiping as a social activity is not the same as objective journalism. Unmistakably, the stories released in celebrity gossip magazines convey heavy moral judgments, making abundantly clear the cultural norms that individuals (in this case, young women) are expected to conform to as members of society. This is where celebrity gossip magazines disappoint, politically speaking, because they promote a highly conventional and superficial ideology about the place of women in society: get married and have children – and by all means stay thin! But while celebrity gossip magazines instruct their readers to feel concern about, say, Jennifer Aniston for not having kids yet in her forties, the actual response may be totally different. McDonnell's interviews indicate that whatever the magazines' content turns out to be, women readers do not necessarily feel constrained by it. On the contrary, they talk back to the text, often criticizing the alleged message (124). They outsmart the text. This is another reason why reading gossip magazines is pleasurable for them. In the end, what women take from their reading is less a series of moral prescriptions than an occasion to engage in heartfelt discussions with other women about shared interests.

McDonnell is interested in (American) popular culture and she duly quotes the major references in the field (e.g. Eco, Fiske, Barthes). It would have been useful to draw upon resources from the sociology of mass media. According to Niklas Luhmann (2000), the function of the mass media is to select pieces of information as today's news. Opinions are attractive in this perspective, because as soon as someone expresses her opinion in the mass media, it encourages other people to express their own opinion in reaction. This guarantees that after one piece information is released, more pieces of information will be available for further selections in the form of counter-opinions: on Monday, if Star X declares that she supports the American military operations in the Middle-East, then on Tuesday Star Y can declare that she disagrees

with Star X. Celebrity gossip magazines operate precisely in this way (by generating opposition and/or variety) and even the readers are called upon to contribute. It doesn't come as a surprise that these publications are primarily interested in keeping rumors going as opposed to upholding-the-truth-in-the-name-of-the-greater-good (110-115).

Furthermore, McDonnell seems to envision culture as axiomatic. The assumption that there is a dominant culture imposed on women implies a form of determinism or perhaps co-determinism, as François Dépelteaux puts it (2008). However, the evidence that McDonnell uncovers suggests a different model. In Dépelteaux's words, we may be dealing with a form of relationalism. Social reality doesn't follow a top-down logic (the application of cultural axioms), but emerges in the course of transactions between multiple actors. The stars, the gossip magazines and the readers are joined together in a network. As isolated individuals, the readers are not as influential as the stars. Nevertheless, as parts of a mass, they hold their share of power in the network. In effect, gossip magazines are competing with each other as well as other publishers to attract this mass. The stars, too, must seduce the mass to maintain their status (by presenting themselves as ordinary for example, even if they are not). In this way, readers are given a voice. This is the secret behind the rise of celebrity gossip magazines: they are designed to let the reader have her say (for example, through articles asking directly "who wears it best?"). Unlike canonical texts, rumors are readily flexible so that everybody can spin them their own way. That said, readers only interface with gossip magazines as parts of a mass. The voice that is given to them comes with severe restrictions – not because of external interferences by ill-intentioned parties, but because one can only speak on behalf of the whole mass in greatly simplified terms. This doesn't make the stereotypes about women in gossip magazines any less objectionable, but it helps to understand why we find them there.

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References

Dépelteaux, François (2008), "Relational Thinking: A Critique of Co-Deterministic Theories of Structure and Agency" in *Sociological Theory*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 51-73.

Luhmann, Niklas (2000), *The Reality of Mass Media*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

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