Introduction
On Outlaw Women and Single Mothers

The title of this book is, of course, a reference to Madonna’s hit song of several years ago. Madonna is a likely starting point for a discussion of feminism and cultural theory, for she has re-created herself as image many times over: from sluttish, pouty boy-toy to Marilyn Monroe glamor queen to every nun’s worst nightmare. Perhaps Madonna’s most outrageous incarnation, after a brief and obviously half-hearted attempt at marriage, was as trendy gay girl with fellow postmodern bon vivant Sandra Bernhard—thereby introducing lesbianism as fun into the National Enquirer. After being banned from music television (MTV) for her erotic, mildly sadomasochistic video Justify Your Love, Madonna spoke out against censorship and against the real violence of male-defined visual imagery. Her most recent efforts at sex and self-promotion included the publication of her book Sex, featuring photos of the material girl in her kinkiest materiality and accompanying text elaborating her fantasies through her dominatrix of an alter ego, Dita.
Accompanying Madonna's own elaboration of superstardom has been a sustained effort—by the mass media and academics alike—to continually produce and reproduce this cultural icon. Madonna circulates constantly in the cultural practices of everyday life, from lurid National Enquirer exposés to the serious cultural scholarship that has been dubbed “Madonna-ology” and that has produced at least one major academic text devoted to Madonna in all her (meta) incarnations.¹

In these academic writings, Madonna (Figure 1) is understood variously as an empowering icon of feminist sensibility, a campy cult figure for both gay men and gay women, a personification of commodity capitalism and its capacity to make human beings into objects for sale and circulation, and a player with codes and conventions. Many critics see her as all these things: the postmodern Circe herself, embodying all the contradictions of a society fascinated by fame, ambivalent about sexuality, hostile toward women. Perhaps, as Shelagh Young notes, “the problem of Madonna for feminists was that she transgressed both the category of the feminine and of the feminist. Madonna’s self-determinedly aggressive sexual presentation certainly undermined the conventional understanding of feminine sexuality as essentially passive, but in what way does this engage with feminist politics?”² The ambiguity of Madonna’s self-presentation (Is she putting us on? Is she mocking the male gaze or willfully giving in to it? Is she whore or madonna, or both, or neither?) points to the already overdetermined status of representing woman in popular culture. In other words, it ain’t easy being a girl.

The figure of Madonna is emblematic of the confused way women are represented in popular culture. We must reckon with the complicated and contradictory nature of images in our culture. It is too simplistic to state that there
are “bad” images that produce “bad” attitudes and behaviors; unfortunately, the situation is more complex than that. Different audiences may interpret the same images in various ways. One group’s “negative” image may be another’s source of empowerment, and the reception of Madonna is a prime example of this complexity.
Two other cultural “moments” of the early 1990s allow me to elaborate what the stakes are for women studying representation and for women as represented objects in our culture. One of the hit films of 1991, *Thelma and Louise* (Figure 2), is a helpful opening for a book on feminism and culture. A female buddy film, it takes us on the (highly stylized, Western) road with Thelma, a homebound housewife, and Louise, a hardbitten waitress, as they attempt to elude the law after Louise has killed Thelma’s would-be rapist. To assess such a film is no easy task and forcefully proves the limitations of a purely textual analysis (an analysis focusing solely on the actual representation) and the need for what I will be calling a feminist contextualism or, more generally, a feminist cultural studies.

The story of the impact of *Thelma and Louise* runs something like this: a film is produced by an acclaimed action-film director (Ridley Scott) and a first-time screenwriter (Callie Khouri) and sets off a torrent of debate. It is alternately read—by the popular press and the popular media—as an angry, violent, “man-bashing” piece of radical feminist propaganda, or as a brave film about feminist consciousness and resistance. Male film critics froth at the mouth, screaming at the director and screenwriter for promoting female violence in response to male violence. Female critics respond, largely defending the film and rationalizing its “excesses” as a legitimate response to male violence and sexual assault. They focus on the generic aspects of the film, its encoding of feminist values within the traditionally male road movie/buddy motif. They praise the two stars, Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon, for their sensitivity and insight. The actresses hit the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Bumper stickers and buttons begin to appear: “Thelma & Louise Finishing School.” To “Thelma and Louise” someone becomes a verb. Editorials appear in reputable papers like
Figure 2. From one-night stand to two-fisted empowerment, Thelma and Louise ride the ambiguous road to liberated adventures and tragic endings. (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1991; photos courtesy of Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)
the *New York Times*, debating the film and its “message.” As is true of so many “explosive” media moments, we can learn more from the contentious public discourse that surrounded the film than from the film itself.

With *Thelma and Louise*, we are faced with a situation in which a film becomes part of a larger discourse on representations of women in Hollywood, male violence, female responses to violence, and so on. *Thelma and Louise*, like more and more of our cultural output, became a signal moment, a “symptomatic” text—much as the film *Fatal Attraction* had been a few years earlier. As feminist critic Sharon Willis notes: “Like *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Thelma and Louise* plugged into ambient anxieties about sexual difference, and men’s and women’s places as organized by the ‘battle of the sexes.’ And like *Fatal Attraction*, *Thelma and Louise* troubled borderlines that contemporary popular critical discourse continues to code as fragile: those between art and life, fantasy and agency, cinematic fiction and the life stories we tell ourselves.”³ The movie became part of a “great debate” over whether it was “evil man-bashing or a liberating fantasy.”⁴ The range of opinions on *Thelma and Louise* was actually quite broad, spreading from “it’s just fantasy, relax” to “it’s just a road movie, and therefore violent like the male films of that genre,” to “it’s feminist and progressive” to “it’s violent and male-bashing.” One critic even claimed it was “fascistic.”⁵ Nonetheless, the lines were often drawn between angry (usually male) commentators and their exultant (usually female) counterparts.

John Robinson, writing in the *Boston Globe*, spoke for many male critics when he claimed that “the movie makes men out to be either rapists or accessories to rape.”⁶ His attack was telling, as he argued that the film is an example of “male-bashing” that, strangely enough, signals the end of feminism: “Male bashing, once the sport of hairy women in denim jackets and combat boots, has flushed
like toxic waste into the cultural mainstream with the
vengeance fantasy ‘Thelma & Louise.’ . . . And it makes
clear that equality is no longer—if it ever was—the goal
of the New Girl Network. It says domination or death are
the only feminist alternatives. It says, inadvertently, that
feminism is dying, not with a bang but with a bashing.”7
In this reading, the film became a reference point for a pop
version of feminism. The critic here created a narrative of
“man-bashing” by constructing a (revisionist) history of
the women’s movement, specifically encoding this history
so as to suggest its lesbian context. John Leo, writing in
U.S. News and World Report, contributed a similar analy-
sis, linking the film to his larger anxiety over the women’s
movement: “The scene is set in the Southwest, but the real
landscape is that of writer Andrea Dworkin and the most
alienated radical feminists. All males in the movie exist only
to betray, ignore, sideswipe, penetrate or arrest our hero-
ines.”8 What is significant is that feminism became the
frame through which this film was analyzed, and, as a
result, the complexities of feminism and feminist demands
for serious structural change were often displaced in a glib
focus on “male-bashing.”9
Indeed, many critics took the opportunity to rail against
feminism and its “male-bashing” excesses, claiming reverse
sexism was at work in the film: “Any movie that went as
far out of its way to trash women as this female chauvin-
isti sow of a film does to trash men would be universally,
and justifiably, condemned.”10
In the right-wing National Review, John Simon went even
further in his attack on feminism, claiming Thelma “asked
for it” when she attempted to leave the bar and get some
air: “Provocative as she is, she gets not air, but attempted
rape.”11 In a consistently irrational review, Simon went
on to assert the possibility of, as he put it, “an emotional
merger”: “Are these women, consciously or unconsciously, in love with each other? Is this perhaps not just a feminist but also a lesbian feminist movie?”

Other critics, often women, urged the boys to “lighten up.” “Really, boys. Calm yourselves,” said Diane White of the Boston Globe. White argued, with no small amount of contradiction, first, that the film is just a fantasy, a film after all, and second, that she understood the desire to fight back against male violence.

Mary Cantwell was one of the few writers to place the film in the context of the real violence women face every day. Recounting the true story of a group of women college students harassed by a group of young men while on vacation, Cantwell wrote: “If Thelma and Louise’s ride sometimes seems as mythic as the flight of Icarus, the pressures that propel them are not. Anyone who doubts that need only be young, female and renting a cottage on Cape Cod to be shown otherwise.”

In an interview with People magazine, star Geena Davis made a strong statement on the treatment of women in film: “Let’s get real here for a second. Ninety-nine percent of all other movies are about women either having shallow, one-dimensional caricature parts or they’re being mutilated, skinned, slaughtered, abused and exploited with their clothes off. Even if this film did convey some horrible man-bashing message—‘Let’s us gals all get guns and kill all the men’—it couldn’t even begin to make up for all the anti-woman movies people don’t even talk about.”

Yet even many of the critics who loved the film (and there were many, perhaps even more than the ones who found it “fascistic”) were unable to pass up the opportunity to take pot shots at feminism: “Whether or not the women’s movement sacrifices moral advantage in this film that allows women to do some of the violent things men have
been doing unquestioned for decades is not the main issue, as some orthodox feminist critics claim. In this age of potentially suffocating political correctness, it's worth remembering that a work of art is not a moral tract.”  

In an interesting piece in *Time*, Margaret Carlson asserted that the film is not feminist at all:

Yet for all the pleasure the film gives women moviegoers who want to see the worst of the opposite sex get what's coming to them, it can hardly be called a woman's movie or one with a feminist sensibility. As a bulletin from the front in the battle of the sexes, *Thelma & Louise* sends the message that little ground has been won. For these two women, feminism never happened. Thelma and Louise are so trapped that the only way for them to get away for more than two days is to go on the lam. They become free but only wildly, self-destructively so—free to drive off the ends of the earth. They are also free to behave like—well, men. For all the talk that *Thelma & Louise* is the first major female buddy movie, it is more like a male buddy movie with two women plunked down in the starring roles. The turning point of Thelma's character rests on one of the most enduring and infuriating male myths in the culture: the only thing an unhappy woman needs is good sex to make everything all right. . . . Thelma is transformed, more confident and buoyant than she has ever been, reducing her angst to the simplistic notion that she was stuck with a husband who was insufficiently accomplished in the bedroom.  

I, too, have difficulty defining this film as feminist. After the attempted rape, Thelma picks up a man on the highway and has a night of wild and passionate sex in which, we are led to believe, she has her first orgasm. Not only is this event troubling, falling as it does on the heels of sexual violence, but it is the narrative moment when the tables turn on the relationship between the two women and Thelma, formerly unable to manage anything, becomes
the aggressive, strong manager of their ensuing escapades. In other words, all she needed was a "good fuck" to awaken the woman in her and empower her to act on her own behalf.

Even the killing of the would-be rapist, though a moment of powerful and visceral retribution, is apparently motivated by Louise's own earlier experience of sexual violence, rather than by a more generalized inclination to avenge women. This angle personalizes the issue of male violence and women's responses to it and stresses individual experience over collective history as the motivating force for women's empowerment. Not exactly a message of self-empowerment or female collective empowerment, this film's exciting focus on the relationship between two women is made narratively possible by male sexuality.

To understand this film's explosion onto the cultural scene, we must not limit ourselves to that textual and narrative analysis which, while perhaps a more accurate reading of the structure of the film, does not provide much insight into the way it became a "symptomatic" text—a text that spoke to larger cultural anxieties and issues surrounding women, male violence, and representation. Indeed, the incessant dialogue about this film points not only to the power of feminism and the anxieties women's independence evokes but to the power of the backlash against that very feminism that was so brilliantly charted by Susan Faludi in her bestselling book *Backlash*. Clearly, as film critic Manohla Dargis noted, "*Thelma & Louise* strikes a nerve—as the cover of *Time* announced—because it's about power, *female power*. Released the same day the Supreme Court's gag-rule made news, the film, with its complex and contradictory messages about women, violence, and power, certainly couldn't be more timely."

About a year later, Vice President Dan Quayle (in the
midst of a vitriolic election year) attacked the television sitcom *Murphy Brown*. The lead character, television anchorwoman Murphy Brown (played by Candice Bergen), had ended a successful season with the birth of her child. In a speech made in San Francisco in May 1992 to the Commonwealth Club, Quayle ranted against this portrayal of single parenthood, claiming the show and its star took a cavalier attitude toward parenting and presented bad role models for young viewers. Speaking after the Los Angeles riots, Quayle bemoaned the sorry state of moral values and individual responsibility, claiming that “it doesn’t help matters when prime-time TV has Murphy Brown, a character who supposedly epitomizes today’s intelligent, highly paid, professional woman, mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another lifestyle choice.”20 Quayle’s speech became the spark that ignited what one could call the “family values” debate that raged in the newspapers and visual media for months and that became a salient topic for election-year speechifying and political campaigning.

From Johnny Carson to David Letterman (“Dan Quayle’s top ten other complaints about television”) to literally hundreds of newspaper articles, television shows, and radio broadcasts, this speech saturated the cultural landscape. The *New York Daily News*’s front-page headline “Quayle to Murphy Brown: You Tramp!” was only one such (amusing) moment. The Quayle remarks provoked not only a response on the television show itself, but endless editorials, articles, television commentaries—from *Time* to the *New York Times*, from *CBS This Morning* to the *Wall Street Journal* (taking the opportunity to trash the media for its liberal bent).21 In true postmodern fashion, the speech again recirculated when in the opening *Murphy Brown* show of the next season the title character “spoke”
to her accuser. The media—“real world” interaction intensified as Dan Quayle (dutifully covered by television newsmen) watched the episode with a group of single African-American parents in Washington, D.C.

Even sober columnists commented on the curious interpenetration of media and life:

If there was still a distinction between politics and entertainment in America before Monday night’s episode of “Murphy Brown,” there did not seem to be one afterward. In the special one-hour episode, an exhausted Ms. Brown, played by Candice Bergen, returned home with her newborn son to find the Vice President on TV news—shown in actual news clips—criticizing her. Livid, she returned to her job to deliver a long, moralistic attack against the Vice President on her television-show-within-a-television-show.22

Quayle went on to send the fictional son of the fictional Murphy Brown a stuffed elephant (symbol of the Republican party) and to air radio announcements for the television series, using another popular culture reference (“Not!” from Wayne’s World) to describe his favorite show.

Even those who thought the vice president’s comments ill-advised and rather stupid found themselves agreeing with him on the “problem” of single-parent households. John Leo, who said, “I think Dan Quayle is a proven nin-compoop,” still found the “message” accurate: “If the message is that family disintegration and the dramatic rise of single-parent families are a major social disaster for this country, then the message is clearly correct.” He went on, quoting sociologist Amitai Etzioni and others (such as former assistant secretary of education Chester Finn), to declare that, in Etzioni’s words, “single parenting is harmful to children.”23

Right-wing pundit Barbara Dafoe Whitehead wrote an
early piece (before her infamous “Dan Quayle Was Right” piece in the *Atlantic*) in which she condemned the “glamorizing” of single motherhood and argued that “the single-mother-by-choice story assaults the very foundation of child well-being. The plain truth is that every child needs both a mother and a father.” Douglas Besharov of the right-wing American Enterprise Institute took the opportunity to focus attention on what he saw as a distinction between those “good” single mothers (divorced) and those “bad” ones (unwed teenage mothers) and to argue for “a clearer understanding of the divergent values that underlie each behavior.”

Some writers in mainstream publications managed to put a more revealing light on the incident. Ellen Snortland, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, said that “‘traditional family values’ is a right-wing euphemism for ‘a white family where Daddy’s the boss.’ . . . Our country’s government is not pro-motherhood, or even pro-parenthood. It’s anti-choice, pro-married and in favor of ‘traditional’ motherhood because the guys in government want the old fairy-tale days back.” Still other commentators took the opportunity to speak of women’s lack of real choices in life. Many leapt to the defense of single mothers, and none more eloquently than Dorothy Gilliam, longtime columnist for the *Washington Post*. She condemned Quayle’s scapegoating of single mothers and declared that “this pseudo-dialogue is not about family values, the values of the diverse families that make up the United States.” The debate about “family values” did not end when the initial furor over the remarks subsided; indeed, this phrase has now become part of our contemporary cultural vocabulary.

These two incidents are only a small sampling of our media culture, not really special ones, yet emblematic of the depth of media saturation in modern American soci-
etly. They illustrate central tenets of the kind of feminist cultural theory I will be elaborating in this book. First, we cannot possibly understand either of these events simply by watching Thelma and Louise and Murphy Brown. This, for me, exemplifies the remarkable level of intertextuality in the contemporary social and cultural environment. We cannot simply “read” these events as discrete texts of culture, as many formalist critics so elegantly do. The meanings of these narratives exist not only in the actual narrative moment of the cultural articulation, but in the vast and complex circuit of articulations that both precede and follow the localized event.

The “event” of the birth of a child “out of wedlock” is only a salient event if a social context exists in which single parenthood, working mothers, and abortion have become the favored stomping ground for the patriarchal right wing. This is not to say that the episode would not have incited questions and discussions were we living in a more hospitable time for women. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, twenty years earlier, the television character Maude took the option (abortion) that the producer of Murphy Brown claimed her star could not take in this era of backlash and antiabortion fervor. Indeed, the producer of Murphy Brown, Diane English, responded to Quayle’s speech with just this context in mind: “If the Vice President thinks it’s disgraceful for an unmarried woman to bear a child and if he believes that a woman cannot adequately raise a child without a father, then he’d better make sure abortion remains safe and legal.” Quayle’s ranting was not just accidental; it was made possible by a context in which “the family” has been a phrase captured by conservative politicians and used as a barometer of social morality.

But the context extends beyond the political discourses that embrace the event and construct it in new and more
all-encompassing ways. Indeed, one must pay attention not only to the competing “extratextual” discourses around this particular show, but also to the competing modes of spectatorship and how actual viewers watch the event and then enter into the circuit of discourses as they read Quayle’s remarks in the morning paper or see a debate on “family values” on Nightline. Women and men all over the country debated both Thelma and Louise and Murphy Brown, and these debates were immediately informed by the outpouring of a highly public discussion, which drew on both other representations (for example, Thelma and Louise in relation to other buddy movies, such as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid) and preexisting discourses (for example, about the politics of the family and the women’s movement). Attacks on single mothers are not new, and odes to the nuclear family have a long history in American culture; the significance lies in the way this particular representation picked up and then restructured and renegotiated these familial discourses.

What struck me most about the subsequent fervor that surrounded the airing of the Murphy Brown episode was that it seemed to have nothing to do with the show I viewed that fateful evening. I, too, was disturbed by the show and found it represented problematic values to American youth. While Quayle castigated Murphy for her errant ways, implying not so subtly that she was too feminist, I wanted to castigate her for her very lack of feminism, for her obsequiousness in the face of traditional definitions of maternity. Indeed, I found the last image of that episode, which shows Murphy in bed holding the newborn boy and singing “You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman,” nauseating (Figure 3). Hardly emblematic of female self-definition and empowerment, the rancid words to that song (“now I know just what was wrong with me”) placed
Murphy firmly on the side of transformative and innate motherhood—birth as a woman’s most significant moment, as transcendent, as inevitable.

The entire depiction of both the birth and the previous episodes of the pregnancy portrays an intelligent, successful, able woman suddenly flummoxed by the possibility of birth. A less than oblique jab at professional women as naive and hysterical little girls underneath all the bluster; this show pays homage to feminism without fundamentally challenging the bedrock assumptions of patriarchal culture. At the delivery, Murphy has no community of women surrounding her and supporting her, but rather is
forced to settle for her housepainter, whose sheer presence in her life constitutes a meaningful relationship. The absence of any significant women friends not only rings false for so many of us, but further paints the picture of successful, tough, funny Murphy as really a sad, alone, incompetent little girl at heart whose maternity points out to her “what was wrong” all along.

Yet my reading of these two cultural moments as questionable if not antifeminist bears little on the cultural reception and experience of them. As we have seen, these specific representations never exist in isolation. As long as male critics construct *Thelma and Louise* as a man-bashing feminist diatribe, feminist critics (and, one might argue, women viewers as well) are hard-pressed to present a more nuanced and complex view of the meaning of that film. As long as the vice president sees fit to pronounce on “family values” through the medium of a television sitcom, we (both the general viewing public and feminist critics) must engage with that discourse, as much as we try to push it beyond those simplistic and misogynist moorings. So, of course, I found myself defending both *Thelma and Louise* and *Murphy Brown*, unable to discover a way to be critical and supportive at the same time, given the prevailing social context of backlash and antifeminism.

Madonna, *Thelma and Louise, Murphy Brown*—all are central images in the construction of female identity and ideas about women’s lives and women’s options. Any good feminist criticism must contend with these “symptomatic” images, yet must always place these images in a context that helps us to understand why and how they become symptomatic and, further, what the implications are for feminist possibilities embodied in the discourses that swirl so furiously around these cultural icons.
The Evolution of Cultural Studies

In this era where the image rules and the referent fades further and further into a fond memory, the need for cultural analysis and critique becomes profoundly urgent. But where does feminism fit in? Do women have a particular relationship to cultural imagery? What, in fact, is the relationship between women as material, historical beings and woman—that contradictory and frustrating image of ourselves that is represented in popular culture? Finally, the question that concerns us here: How can we begin to develop a specifically feminist cultural theory? The question is not an idle one, or simply resolved by the “add women and stir” method of most cultural analyses.

Indeed, the last fifteen years have witnessed a phenomenal growth in the area of feminism and representation, traversing all types of cultural artifacts, including film, television, and advertising. Literary criticism, in particular, has responded to a growing feminist movement and the introduction of women’s studies into the academy, so that we can now almost point to an alternative feminist literary “canon.” The language of feminist film criticism—particularly in its Lacanian versions—has entered into the critical vocabulary of film theorists on both sides of the Atlantic, and has found a home within film schools and media courses. In recent years feminist critics have examined that peculiarly home-based and ubiquitous medium of television and are beginning to explore the complex relations between television families and “real” families, between soap opera and everyday life. Women’s magazines, long ignored and trivialized, have now been recognized as the powerful forces they are in shaping and structuring commonsense understandings of femininity. The ever-present figure of the advertising image, which appears as
so much “background” information, has been decon-
structed and criticized both for its portrayal of women
and for the consumerist ethos it so vividly and success-
fully promotes.

There is also a larger context, however: the context of
the “media society” itself. As early as 1967 Guy Debord put
forward the by now accepted postmodern claim that we
live in a world increasingly defined by the image; we live
in a “society of the spectacle,” as Debord titled his book.
In more recent years, the French postmodern theorist Jean
Baudrillard has expanded on this theme and stressed the
dominance of “simulacra” in a world where everything is
reduced to an appearance, a simulation of the real which
does not exist anymore.

Whether postmodern or simply modern, most cultural
critics have acceded to the claim that our world is increas-
ingly marked by the presence of communications tech-
nologies in all areas of life: from the family clustered
around its “entertainment center” complete with color tele-
vision (with all-night cable channels), remote-control
video, and compact disc player to the student or business-
person staring into the green screen of a home computer,
the new technologies are an ever-present part of Ameri-
can reality. Whether one sees these phenomena as simply
an extension of the logic of consumer capitalism, or as a
fundamentally new shift requiring new theories and polit-
ical alignments, is itself a subject of much debate.

Yet the sheer growth in new media technologies and their
increasing presence in everyday life are inescapable reali-
ties, brought home to many of us by the election of Ronald
Reagan in 1980, when an old “B” movie actor became the
first truly media-savvy U.S. president. It is no accident that
the widely read cartoon *Doonesbury* chose to parody Rea-
gan by placing him as a sort of addled android filling the
television screen of which he seems to be an integral part. Arguably, no election has been the same since.

Thus, it can surely be no coincidence that, as this media frame grows increasingly larger, encompassing more and more areas of social practice, an outpouring of cultural critique of all stripes emerges from even those formerly concerned with the most orthodox of endeavors. On the left, this can be seen as a shift (still in process) from a Frankfurt School\textsuperscript{33} condemnation of mass culture to a more tentative and perhaps even optimistic version of cultural resistance and political possibilities. Since the Frankfurt School declared mass culture to be the last decadent gasp of a culture in decay, numerous attempts have been made to reevaluate popular culture and to challenge this view of it (shared by many conservative and mainstream theorists along with the marxists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer) as debased and necessarily aiding in the wholesale reproduction of capitalism and its associated repressions. Popular culture came to be seen as a legitimate area of social analysis that was not simply reducible to a variety of brainwashing metaphors and terms of denigration. New methods and analytic frameworks that were responsive to the specifics of mass culture—as opposed to “high culture” categories and values—were needed to fully understand the scope and meaning of “the popular.” Laura Kipnis\textsuperscript{34} may be right when she asserts that “mass culture” has now become the privileged subject of left-wing academia. As courses in popular culture appear on the university campuses and reputable academics turn from their dusty books to expostulate on the bewildering popularity of The Cosby Show and the meanings of Madonna, cultural studies emerges as a popular form itself.

In any case, it is surely no longer possible to understand the media as somehow “outside” society or an adjunct to
“larger” social concerns. One could argue that the media have so inserted themselves into the everyday life of most Americans (indeed, most people) that they have come to construct our sense of what it means to live in the (post)-modern world. This new emphasis on mass cultural criticism is, for many theorists, itself indicative of the move to a postmodern culture: Kipnis notes that “the shift from a refusal to an embrace of the popular in theoretical discourse marks a break between modernism and postmodernism.”35 The media are everywhere, and as such can no longer be relegated to secondary status in any critical analysis of contemporary society.

Feminist critics have been quick to point out that the representation of women in this media-saturated society is particularly fraught with contradictions and dilemmas. For it is women who more often than not are the “imaged” in our culture. In this society of the spectacle, it is women’s bodies that are the spectacle upon which representation occurs; it is women’s bodies that are “represented as the negative term of sexual differentiation, spectacle-fetish or specular image . . . woman is constituted as the ground of representation, the looking glass held up to man.”36 This is true not simply for the most visible manifestations of, say, pornography, but for the innocuous advertising image and the mundane television movie of the week as well. Women’s bodies sell cars, beer, and laundry detergent; women’s loves and lives sell soap opera fantasies; women’s fears and vulnerability sell blockbuster action films.

Yet women are in the strange and unique position of also being spectators, consumers of their very own image, their very own objectification. At the same time that we witness our own representation, we are also, so often, denied a place in that process of representation—denied a voice—so that more often than not those images of ourselves that stare
at us from the glossy pages of the women’s magazines or from the glowing eye of the television screen are not of our own creation. They are, in more senses than one, truly “man-made.” Teresa de Lauretis asserts that “as [a] historical individual, the female viewer is also positioned in the films of classical cinema as spectator-subject; she is thus doubly bound to the very representation which calls on her directly, engages her desire, elicits her pleasure, frames her identification, and makes her complicit in the production of (her) woman-ness.”

It is no accident that the feminist project has been deeply concerned from its inception with “the cultural”; even the founding texts of the “second wave” of feminism (Betty Friedan on women’s magazines, Kate Millet and Simone de Beauvoir on fiction) delved into the ways in which the everyday objects of cultural consumption are as much a part of the maintenance of patriarchal social relations as are the inequities of a sexist workplace. Annette Kuhn notes, “One of the major theoretical contributions of the women’s movement has been its insistence on the significance of cultural factors, in particular in the form of socially dominant representations of women and the ideological character of such representations, both in constituting the category ‘woman’ and in delimiting and defining what has been called the ‘sex/gender’ system.” Speaking specifically about film criticism, E. Ann Kaplan points out that feminist cultural work has a long history, beginning with the first moments of the women’s movement in the 1960s: “The study of images of women in film dates back to work by the National Organization for Women in the late 1960’s; to the pioneering journal, *Women and Film*, published from 1970–1972; to film journals like *Jump Cut* that made feminist approaches a central part of their format; and, finally, to the emergence in
1976 of a journal, *Camera Obscura*, specifically devoted to feminist film theory.”

Feminist cultural criticism is a double-edged project. It is a critique of existing (patriarchal) representations as well as a construction of alternative or oppositional cultural images and practices. The line between cultural criticism and cultural practice is indeed a fine one for feminists. Rosemary Betterton goes so far as to propose that feminist criticism is a challenge to representation itself because of the interdisciplinary nature of feminist criticism and the ways in which the feminist movement, by positioning women as viewing subjects, has challenged both the traditional divisions between high art and mass culture and the ideologies of objectivity and neutrality. Other feminists have also argued for the unique relationship between women and popular culture, stating that “the feminist critique is a critique of culture at once from within and from without, in the same way in which women are both in the cinema as representation and outside the cinema as subjects of practices.”

Tania Modleski points out that notions of mass culture and notions of the feminine have historically been bound together, mass culture being seen as feminized culture and denigrated on those terms, which sets up a hierarchical opposition between femininity/consumption/reading and masculinity/production/writing. Judith Williamson claims for women a position as a sort of transcendent signifier for other “differences.” In a fascinating essay on the relationship between femininity and colonization as embodied in print advertisements, Williamson argues that sexual difference “carries” other differences because “woman” is seen as a “natural” category to which other differences (less easily naturalizable) can be grafted. If women do have a unique position within popular culture, then feminist theories of representation might themselves occupy a privi-
leged space within the discourses on culture. We will return to this controversial suggestion later.

This book sets out to explore this terrain of feminist cultural theory, although I do not attempt to review every theoretical move and development in this enormous field I am calling feminist cultural studies. The goal, rather, is three-fold: to critically introduce readers to the main concepts and theoretical frameworks of feminist cultural criticism; to place these concepts and frameworks in the historical context that produced them; and, finally, to present a model of a feminist cultural criticism that is at once inter-textual, multidisciplinary, and deeply invested in the demystification of patriarchal images and the construction of feminist ones. The examples and case studies I will use are drawn from a variety of mainstream popular media, particularly film and television but also advertisements and occasionally music.\textsuperscript{45}

The intention of this book is thus \textit{not} to provide a comprehensive review of these various feminist theories of representation. Rather, it is to sketch out broadly the major concepts and themes of the field and to begin to suggest possibilities for alternative ways of understanding the representation of women. To oversimplify, there have been two primary strands in feminist theorizing on representation and popular culture. These approaches have vastly divergent social histories, one deriving largely from sociological and empirical communications research, the other cohering around a distinctly different set of assumptions and preoccupations that might be called “postmarxist” or even “poststructuralist.”\textsuperscript{46} I argue here that these two positions—although seemingly in opposition—in fact have more in common than either would care to admit, particularly concerning their theorization of the relationship between culture and social relations.

First, I examine what I call the “images” perspective,
where meaning is perceived as readily apparent and judged in terms of its sexist, or nonsexist, content and characterization. This position is shown to be limited both politically by its liberal assumptions and intellectually by its reflection model of cultural production and consumption. Although it has often provided useful data and stressed the necessity of empirical research, this view remains locked into an overly simplistic understanding of the uses of the mass media. This approach has largely been superseded by the critical tools of semiotics, structuralism, and psychoanalysis, yet it remains important both as a counterpoint to later work and in relation to the development of differing models of communications research.

I then discuss what I call the “signification” perspective, which posits itself overtly as an alternative to the dominant mode of cultural inquiry. Although this position is shown to have numerous advantages over the previous one—particularly in its recognition of the interactive and necessarily unstable nature of the production of meaning—it, too, fails to adequately include social context in the close analysis of representation.

Following this critical, historical review, I examine central concepts and frameworks of feminist cultural theory, from theories of the male gaze to questions of narrative to concerns around consumption and viewing. These areas of research and theory are necessarily overlapping; I hope the reader will be tolerant when the moments of overlap slip into moments of repetition. The book continues in chapter 5 with a case study of backlash images in the 1980s and early 1990s. This chapter is intended to “model” a way of doing feminist cultural analysis that places those representations within the larger context of a historical and social moment and also relates the images to other discourses, such as the prevailing political debates.
While but a snapshot view of the backlash years, this chapter is intended to illustrate the contextual, intertextual framework I endorse.

Finally, I look briefly at the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England, as expressing an affinity with feminist critique in its insistence on an interactional and experiential definition of culture. Although this model should not be adopted wholesale, it does offer interesting possibilities for the development of feminist cultural studies. This third alternative entails an engagement with “material girls” in the context of a theory that starts from a feminist standpoint and proceeds with its intellectual borrowings with care and caution.

Throughout, I am concerned with elaborating the specificity of feminist cultural criticism, both in relation to social theory in general and in relation to the mass media at large. To a great extent, this is a question of methodology (for example, what makes a cultural theory “feminist”), a question that continues to plague feminist theorists eager to construct new methodologies and deeply wary of the risks of “borrowing” from other theoretical frameworks. It is also a question of the relationship of women to images and to the process of representation in general: Do women have a particular relationship to cultural imagery, as has been suggested by theorists like Williamson and Betterton? How are we to understand the relationship between the representation of woman and women’s actual lived experience? These questions will in no way be fully answered in this book; rather, they will serve as a type of litmus test to gauge the usefulness of particular feminist analyses. It is on this last question, in particular, that feminist theories of representation will either stand or fall.

It is my contention that, while there is assuredly no one
way of doing good feminist cultural work, there are ways that tie in to different kinds of social and political insights and practices. The kind of intertextual, sociological, and contextual analysis I propose explicitly and implicitly asks deeply social questions of cultural objects and cultural processes. This book provides a critique of the narrowly textual and overly psychoanalytic focus of much recent feminist culture criticism and tries to move us in the direction of an intertextual, contextual, materialist feminism.