Agnieszka Graff: Has popular culture truly gone global? Does national identity make a difference? In your lecture, you mentioned the omnipresence of the Paris Hilton image, her self-perpetuating celebrity status. Your example was London. You said one would have to be like F.R. Leavis and abandon civilization entirely to avoid media coverage of Paris Hilton in central London, and even then she would inevitably catch up with you, in the free papers given away daily and left on London buses. Well, does it matter to British consumers that Paris Hilton is American?

Pamela Church Gibson: It must matter to some extent because we have our own homegrown variety of celebrity. You know the cliché about those who are famous because they are famous? The English variants, interestingly enough, are quite often far more homely. Although there is a current Big Brother contestant who models herself on Victoria Beckham, there are “the Twins” who enjoy national celebrity status, but are actually quite inarticulate, they are just students. In
British pop culture, in reality television, you have these “ordinary” people who may not necessarily win, but they attain celebrity status. Jade Goody is a good example of this; she is not conventionally attractive; you might call her “interesting,” but actually her appeal is the very ordinariness and imperfection of her looks. Most important, she is also working class and a young single mother and very much what you would call “mouthy.” She became a kind of minor celebrity as a Big Brother contestant, and she endorsed a fragrance. But it all went terribly wrong because her racism came out; she was very nasty to another contestant, an Indian woman, on a later program.

AG: So there is a limit to the mouthiness that gets accepted nowadays, even in tabloids...

PCG: Oh, definitely. But the most interesting English homegrown celebrities—and this has nothing to do with America at all—are the football wives and girlfriends, nicknamed the WAGS, who receive enormous media coverage. When England was playing in the World Cup in Germany last year, there was far more space in the tabloids given over to what the women were doing rather than the men, the actual players. Every day there would be news about what they had worn the night before, the thousands of pounds they spent on champagne, the fact that they sang and danced on tables. They engaged in a luxury version of what is described now in England as ladette culture.

AG: Is ladette related to what is referred to at this conference as fun culture—group behavior linked to parties, lots of alcohol and an emphasis on trendiness? Or is there something particularly British about “ladette” that “fun” doesn’t quite capture?

PCG: “Fun” is a very American term; it comes from magazines like Bust. It is girly, self-consciously feminine, as well as American. What happens in England, however, is that young women go out and get very very drunk. Here there is a culture of binge-drinking. The “ladette” is a female equivalent of the so called new lad; the girls are doing what young men do but doing it in a very dressed up and conspicuously feminine way. Their skirts are very revealing; they use foul language and fall over in public places.

AG: Sounds like British working class culture, not an effort to emulate American fads. This brings us back to the general question of Americanization.
PCG: Yes. British academics have been terribly troubled about “Americanization” since the fifties. Academics like Richard Hoggart were very troubled then by what they saw as the Americanization of Britain through popular culture. It has to do with British concerns about the loss of the “authentic” and, too, the loss of the local. However, their liberal worries made not a jot of difference. British pop culture has been thoroughly Americanized, but it still manages to throw out its own local heroes, its own type of celebrity. And quite often they are connected to football. There are also English film stars who gain popularity here and in America, such as Keira Knightley, who is a very slender, very good-looking young woman. She was nominated for an Oscar for appearing in *Pride and Prejudice*. But more importantly for her career, she has also appeared in an enormously successful Disney franchise, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy. And her appearance has clearly been Americanized in some ways. Her clothes are provided by the American stylist who also dresses Paris Hilton. Her name is Rachel Zoe, and the young stars or “wannabee” stars whom she dresses are referred to by the tabloids as the “zobots”.

AG: With Knightley, here we enter the sphere of export—the theme of this issue of *The Americanist*. She represents the sort of sophisticated slender British beauty that sells marvelously across the Atlantic. What about British ordinariness and mouthiness?

PCG: Oh no, that won’t sell. Americans won’t have any of that.

AG: And *Bridget Jones*? She certainly went global.

PCG: But Bridget, you see, was not mouthy, not in the film version. In the book, she is far more aggressive; she gets drunk and berates people publicly. But in the film, although she still makes mistakes and does stupid things at work, it’s brought down to comic terms, like sliding down the firemen’s pole. But what is interesting from the export-import perspective is that this supposedly homegrown British heroine had to be played by an *American* film star, who then had to go and learn a British accent in order to do it.

AG: So what is the bit of Britishness that sells in America?

PCG: It’s quite simple really; it’s social class. The upper echelons, of course, not the ladettes.
AG: Hugh Grant?

PCG: Yes, it’s Hugh Grant. And it’s Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*. It’s literary classics. It’s English country houses.

AG: Nostalgia?

PCG: Yes, nostalgia, an obsessive interest in social class, in aristocracy, in a different existence.

AG: This comes with the claim, of course, that American society is classless. The problem of class disparity is safely displaced onto Britain, resolved by watching these beautiful subtle people who are so obviously *not us*, and yet somehow *like us*, or like our fantasy of ourselves. I find it interesting to see how consistently Jane Austen is put to such use. Are English filmmakers happy to cater to these needs?

PCG: Of course they are. In fact, one could argue that *Pride and Prejudice*—the latest film version—has been simplified for the American market, trimmed down to suit just such tastes and fantasies. All the subtleties of Jane Austen were stripped away. For instance, when Darcy discovers that Wickham has eloped with Lydia and proves what a wonderful man he is by forcing Wickham into marrying her, we have all this happening in front of Elizabeth. It is all telescoped into a single scene in one room where it’s all explained. That did not happen in any of the earlier adaptations. The television version, which did very well, has some of the subtleties of Jane Austen. You know, the one with Colin Firth that Bridget Jones is obsessed about.

AG: Are you suggesting that by telescoping it all into one room, having it all laid out on the table, the film version turns a complex plot into a sort of soap opera?

PCG: Yes, it is taking a quite complex and subtle series of events and reflections—and turning it into something completely simplistic. Elizabeth opens the letter and says: “Oh dear, my sister has eloped with Wickham”—and Darcy looks at her and off he goes. There is no long period where she wonders about Darcy’s part in all this.

The other interesting thing about the film is the way it used the Peak District, which is a top tourist attraction. There is a scene where Elizabeth is en route for
Pemberley, which is in Derbyshire, and you see her in most un-Jane Austen style climbing up this enormous hill, and then standing on top of it so that Keira Knightley, as Elizabeth, looks like an advertising poster for the Peak District. It’s pure tourism. “Pemberley” is Chatsworth, which is one of the most notable English stately homes, and every aspect of Chatsworth is glorified, lionized. Interestingly, the stately home that stood in for Pemberley in the earlier televised version has also used this fact to its advantage. The people who run it organized Pride and Prejudice-themed tours of the “Pemberley estate.” What is interesting here is the conflation of all sorts of forms of popular culture and consumer culture. If you remember, Bridget Jones is obsessed by Mr. Darcy in a wet T-shirt. Now, that is precisely because Colin Firth, in the television version of Pride and Prejudice, dives into a pond at this stately home, which was cast as Pemberley. Obviously, he does not do this in the novel. But this did not prevent the people who ran the stately home from advertising these tours by saying: “See the pond where Mr. Darcy swam.”

☐ AG: Does it work?

PCG: It certainly does. The visits to all the stately homes and smaller country houses that were featured in the Heritage films of the 80s and 90s shot up by 200% as a result.

☐ AG: We are not talking about American tourism here exclusively, are we?

PCG: Not at all. It’s English as well. The English too are nostalgic.

☐ AG: …For Victorian times?

PCG: Not so much Victorian, as Edwardian, I would say. There is something about the Victorian era that doesn’t do well in nostalgia. Edwardian nostalgia is basically based on the notion of a pre-World War I idyll, a golden summer, the white muslins, the idea that it is always summer; people are always in gardens and country-house grounds. Now the films of course are very selective…

☐ AG: …As in choosing, again and again, E.M. Forster novels?

PCG: Yes, in Forster there is plot; there is dialogue; there are clearly defined characters. That sets him apart from Virginia Woolf, where, even in her early work,
there is so much that’s interior. What worries me about the Merchant Ivory films is that—like in the film version of *Pride and Prejudice*—all the moral subtleties of Forster are wiped out. For example, one enormously successful film was *Howard’s End*, which won an Oscar in 1992. As you know, in the novel, there is a casual sexual encounter between the working-class Leonard Bast and one of the Schlegel sisters, which results in the birth of an illegitimate child who eventually inherits Howard’s End. In the film, this is shown as a romantic-sexual tryst between a very good looking young man and Helena Bonham Carter, the “Heritage Queen,” who is cast as this Schlegel sister. In the novel, they are both described as very plain, and whole thing is also morally ambivalent. The thing about Forster is that you can strip away all the subtleties and still be left with enough plot to drive a good movie, so you can have your cake and eat it too. You can sell this stuff as high culture, to the middle class, to the people who think, “Oh, I read that book in high school,” or perhaps, “I should have read that book in high school.” A lot of these viewers are older. They are not the sort of audiences that would go to see a blockbuster. These people go to the cinema to see Heritage films because it is, to them, almost like going to the opera or going to an art gallery.

**AG:** I understand the appeal. I buy into this cultured idyll and fall for the loveliness of Helena Bonham Carter myself, even if I cringe about the lost subtleties of E. M. Forster. Heritage film loveliness is partly what drew me to Oxford. But now, of course—partly thanks to Oxford cultural studies classes—I wonder about the politics of all this. Would you agree that for the English, the appeal of Heritage films is a way to contain or exorcise post-colonial anxieties—sentimentalizing, idealizing a period which one is normally made to feel a bit uncomfortable about in a multi-cultural Britain?

**PCG:** Yes, there is a lot of colonial anxiety in Forster, which is almost completely sanitized out of filmed Forster. The films are very selective: their version of the world is all white, and it is not even middle class; it is upper-middle class. And it is not Oxford now, the Oxford you would have gone to. It is Oxford in the past: the young men in boats and women, of course, not allowed to take degrees.

But I think the *English* interest in the past has less to do with guilt about the colonial past than with the idea of Britain’s greatness. Britain fell from grace in the aftermath of World War II, economically. The Labour government painstakingly put together a Welfare State, but the voters threw them out six years later. They
returned Winston Churchill to power because of the Churchillian rhetoric of “making Britain great again.” Then there was this casting about for a role in the “new world order” and the way to find it was, of course, to buddy up to America. And there is this English myth, this illusion that English politicians have, that they are equal partners in this so-called “special relationship.”

☐ AG: Are you suggesting that the claim to equality is based on cultural capital, a certain vision of Britain’s glorious past? And that it is this vision of Britishness that sells so well in Heritage films?

PCG: Yes, it is indeed based on cultural capital. It’s all about “You’ve got the money, but we’ve got the stately homes.” Stratford on Avon is a huge tourist attraction for Americans. Or think of Shakespeare in Love. It was enormously successful, and of course, it was not really about Shakespeare, though if you know Shakespeare you could recognize the quotes. It was an interesting film in that people could see it for such different reasons. The more cultural capital they had, the more smugly they could respond to the film. Like the little boy who is called John Webster, who likes torturing mice, or the fact that there are lines from all over the Shakespeare’s plays threaded throughout the script. All this represents what some American tourists believe to have been Shakespeare’s England, which is why they go to Stratford. This is how the unequal post-war alliance between America and England works: “You’ve got the money but we’ve got Shakespeare.”

☐ AG: Could the same be said about James adaptations? Do his international themes feed a certain vision of British-American relations?

PCG: It’s no accident that the James adaptations did not do so well at the box office. They are something altogether different from the Heritage industry. Campion’s adaptation of A Portrait of a Lady, for instance, is what I believe a good adaptation of a novel from the past ought to be. Nicole Kidman is not presented in a glamorous way and neither is England. When she runs out of the stately home, she finds herself in a kind of thicket. She seems unable to get out of it, because she is trapped. Had it been a Heritage film, we would get an enormous grassy lawn, enormous grounds, carefully landscaped. But here is the past as entrapment. Jane Campion as an Australian could do this. Another extraordinary example is the Age of Innocence. When I heard that Martin Scorsese was going to adapt it, I was amazed, but it turned out to be wonderful.
AG: Unlike the film version of *The House of Mirth*?

PCG: Yes, that was done by a British director and is absolutely horrible. But to return to Heritage films, my point is that they show the past in a very particular, selective way. They glamorize it. They don’t show it as stultifying. A film like *Maurice* is interesting, because it does show a glamorous hero with a Heritage haircut, and yet he is clearly trapped by the fact that homosexuality is illegal. One of his friends is sent to prison for having sex with a man. Now, the pro-Heritage camp says these films are progressive precisely because they are often foreground issues of gender and sexuality. The anti-Heritage line points out that while they do all this, they do it in the context of beautiful clothes, lingering shots of National Trust properties, rolling hills, stately homes, expensive clothes—and this undercuts the progressive message.

AG: It is basically a charge of ideological complicity, right? I have come across the argument that makes a direct link between these films and the political climate in which they were made: i.e. that *A Room With a View* (1986) and *Maurice* (1987) idealized the past in a period of conservatism, the Thatcher years. But why would Americans be interested in any of this, because of their own conservatism?

PCG: Well, it’s a bit more complex than “complicity.” Moreover, I would say there are Heritage films that actually are set in the present. *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, for instance, can be fruitfully analyzed as a Heritage film. It’s also an interesting import-export story, by the way, because *Four Weddings* had a brief opening in Britain first, and it didn’t make any significant impression. Then it went to America and did incredibly well. Americans took up Hugh Grant immediately. They fell in love with him.

AG: Is it because he represents the “sensitive male” who also manages to be sexy?

PCG: Precisely. The other thing about the success of this film, the key to its cleverness, is the way it plays on the “special relationship” that Thatcher and Blair believed that they had with America. In *Four Weddings*, just as in *Notting Hill*, you have an English hero who is bumbling, gentle, incompetent, which is what many Americans believe all Englishmen to be. Crucially, he is also emotionally ineffectual, so he needs a straightforward American girl.
AG: Straightforward indeed! Remember the scene in *Four Weddings* where the Andie MacDowell character is counting all her past lovers? But it is true, she still comes off as somehow innocent and shy. This is oddly like the “young American girl meets European boy” theme in James—the *Daisy Miller* type of situation, where the American girl remains innocent no matter how vulgar she might be, and our own integrity as audience depends on recognizing and cherishing this innocence.

PCG: Yes, it is very much like that. We exonerate everything she does, because of this quality of innocence she has about her. With the MacDowell character you also have to ignore the fact that she marries a rich conservative MP for his money. But then she turns up on the doorstep in the pouring rain and says she is terribly sorry...

AG. Yes, and all is forgiven. After all, we don’t want her to die the way Daisy does in the James tale. But are we saying here that the export value of *Four Weddings* was the fact that America cast as a fresh, lovely, innocent but directly emotional girl?

PCG: Yes, that’s how I see it. Above all, American audiences enjoy the idea of this girl rescuing the bumbling, inept Englishman from the trap that he is in. Unable to commit, unable to express his emotions, unable to settle down, inconsistent—now, that’s Europe for you. America comes and sorts it all out. That’s how I think these films work. But they don’t always work. For instance, *Love Actually* (2003) failed because Americans didn’t have a point of reference. It is the last installment in a long line of a certain type of Hugh Grant work, the one where Hugh Grant plays the Prime Minister. He is meant to represent Britishness. But casting him as the Prime Minister is taking it a stretch too far.

AG: ...because Americans are not really interested in anybody else’s politics?

PCG: They are not. But the other thing they overdid in this film has to do with gender and sex. There is one particularly odious character, an Englishman, played by Kris Marshall, who doesn’t seem to have any success with young women. He goes off to America, goes into a bar somewhere in the Midwest as soon as he arrives, and these beautiful girls who look like Pussycat Dolls take him straight home.
AG: ... because he has such a sexy English accent?

PCG: That’s right. And this is just too grotesque, it’s simply too much for Americans to swallow. It can be read as anti-American. With Andie MacDowell, it was different. She embodied innocence—and you are right, it was a Jamesian sort of innocence. Similarly, Julia Roberts is disarming in Notting Hill, in her effort to get Hugh Grant. But there is nothing innocent about this bar scene. Moreover, if you want to keep Hugh Grant popular in the States, you simply do not cast him as Prime Minister in love with a tea-lady.

AG: And what does Britain import from the U.S.?

PCG: British popular culture has its own sphere of operation and it actively decides who from America it wants to take in. What the British seem to like best is American female celebrities like Paris Hilton or Britney Spears....

AG: ...who then end up in British glossies as the football wives’ best friends? Now that’s also a certain kind of diplomacy...

PCG: That’s right. There is a kind of selective appropriation of the bits of American culture that the British want. Look at what happened to British television. For a long time people were amazed by its ability to function well as a public service, quality public broadcasting. All that has basically disappeared. Channel Four, for instance, was meant to be serious TV; it was created to provide a space for people who are often absent from television: people from ethnic diasporas, gays and lesbians. Well, today it’s all makeover shows, reality television, or reruns of American soap operas.

AG: You don’t sound like a great fan of popular culture. Yet you have spent decades analyzing it. What drives you to this subject?

PCG: It’s television that troubles me. I love going to the cinema, and I am quite indiscriminate about what I see. I don’t disdain blockbusters for instance. I think they are very important social texts. But I do get disheartened by British television and the way that it has changed.

AG: You began your lecture yesterday with a warning: that we should not expect from you “high theory,” psychoanalysis, etc. You said your talk was
inspired by good old-fashioned leftist concerns about class and inequality. This was not a joke—rather a provocation. Do you feel that cultural studies scholars have been spending too much time engaging in subtle theoretical readings—deconstructive, Lacanian, etc.—forgetting about the progressive politics at the origin of their field?

PCG: Yes. Firstly there is that. Secondly, of course, there is feminism. After all, this is a feminist conference. It has been twenty years since this association was set up. Now, feminism, whatever else it may be doing, primarily resides today in the academy. Frankly, I find this very sad. Take this conversation I recently had with a student. A boy came up to me, someone who’s doing a final year dissertation around queer theory, and said: “I’m a gay man; I’m 24 years old, and now I find queer theory. Where has it been all this time? It’s been in the academy.” This is precisely my worry about feminism. It was originally a project meant to change the texture of people’s everyday lives. I do think it is important to bring this up at this moment. One of the conference participants came up to me after my talk yesterday. She told me how thrilled she was when I said that I didn’t go to marches about reclaiming the night just so that young girls could get terribly drunk and fall about in public places. Now, she herself is working on the representation of the lone mother in popular culture—and feminism was originally designed to address just these kinds of social concerns. What it has done instead is to align itself with the subtleties of high theory, where it is in constant danger of being co-opted. Feminism wasn’t meant to be shut off in the academy where it can’t do any harm, where it can just teach women’s studies to people who want to be taught women’s studies. So I thought I was justified in my provocation.

AG: But you participated in the feminist turn towards theory yourself. You were an important figure in the pornography debates, with your edited collection *Dirty Looks*. It was, after all, an effort to complicate the conversation, to make it more “subtle,” to address pornography as representation, through theory, rather than through moralism.

PCG: I participated in the porn debate in the early 90s for a very specific set of reasons. This was the early 90s, the end of the Thatcher years, the time of things like the attempt to pass the notorious Clause 28, which was trying to make it illegal to “promote” homosexuality in schools. In the wake of all this there was a sort of flurry of activity around pornography in London. It culminated for me in
some truly absurd events. For example, there is this lesbian photographer called Della Grace, who takes quite explicit photographs of S/M lesbians. She is a lesbian feminist. Now, a feminist bookshop in London refused to stock her books, which led to other feminists demonstrating in front of the bookshop.

☐ **AG:** Sounds like the photographer Sally Mann story in the United States—she took nude photos of her children, which caused an uproar, calls for censorship, including some from people who called themselves feminists.

**PCG:** Yes, it was very much like that. In Britain an organization was set up called WAC—Women Against Censorship. It was in this context that I was asked to do *Dirty Looks*—as a feminist who was against censorship. A few years later, the British Film Institute asked me to do *More Dirty Looks*. But nowadays I am getting worried by the co-option of feminism by a new, ironic brand of pornography culture. Angela McRobbie has called this the “ironic normalization” of pornography in popular culture. This is discussed in *Raunch Culture*, a very interesting recent book about all this by a young American journalist named Ariel Levy. So you see, I am not sure we need to revisit the pornography debates these days, except perhaps by looking at the consumers. The claim of *Raunch Culture*—that feminism has been co-opted by commercial pornographic culture—is not necessarily progressive. There are things about this book that worry me, but it is certainly important. A more sophisticated, properly academic book is Drucilla Cornell’s *The Imaginary Domain*. She is against censorship, but she also suggests that transgressive sexuality should remain just that—not be shoved in your eye in the supermarket.

☐ **AG:** It is no longer a battle between anti-pornography and anti-censorship camps. The debate within feminism is much more complex.

**PCG:** What worries me is that when I say I am not against pornography people think I am for the subversively “ironic,” young women’s appropriation of very aggressive pornographic imagery and its appropriation by women who call themselves feminists. Well, I am not for that. I haven’t got any daughters, but I do have sons. I also have very young nieces. One of them is eleven. And it troubles me to see young girls in a state of semi-undress getting ogled in public by men, including older men. These girls are getting up at six in the morning to look that way. It’s tyrannical. We know the look—thin, sexy. Well, Ariel Levy suggests that they want to look exactly like porn stars. The type of pop culture they are drawn to is shows
like the *Pussycat Dolls*—a show that is made to look like it’s taking place in a bordello. There is a bit less of that in England, perhaps, than in the U.S. When you read *Raunch Culture* you will find that most of the examples are American; the English ones aren’t quite as bad.

**AG:** Do you see a place in popular culture where explicit sexuality might actually be empowering to women, rather than exploitative?

**PCG:** I think it is kind of twofold. There have been efforts to create pornography for women. There is a woman called Clarissa Smith who has written a book called *One for the Girls*. It’s about a magazine called *For Women*. I interviewed the editor before the book came out. The magazine was an attempt to create soft-core pornography for women, where women could be equal. Now, it actually folded; it didn’t do at all well. None of them seem to go very far commercially, except perhaps for Candida Royalle. She is about the only woman in a position of real power in the porn industry. Another thing that worries me is that although porn stars are very well paid, this doesn’t last long for them, and the people who make real money in the porn world are men.

**AG:** Is this what you meant by “gender divide in popular culture”?

**PCG:** No, this is about something else. What I meant by the “gender divide” is that there are two separate discourses. Nobody has really theorized it yet. You get immensely successful magazines such as *Grazia* for women, where there aren’t any men. This is no accident, of course. There is a woman here who is doing her thesis on *Grazia*, and she claims they did extensive market research before they launched it. What they found out is that women don’t want any men in it. It’s an exclusively female world. This belies the old feminist line about women’s magazines—that they exist primarily to instruct women how to be attractive for men, to shame them into attractiveness. But actually, it doesn’t seem to work that way. Women are doing it for women. Similarly, the traditional feminist line on fashion—that women do it for men—seems to be all wrong. What they do for men is make themselves look like Pussycat Dolls, but not fashion, not women’s glossies. This has nothing to do with men.

**AG:** ... and the male side of the gender divide in popular culture? What about the new “lad culture” in Britain? We get an occasional glimpse of it in Poland, because the “lads” come to Cracow to enjoy the cheap beer...
PCG: To understand this, you have to go back to the 80s, when there was a tremendous boom in fashion, in visual culture, around masculinity. Suddenly, there were all these images of men in popular culture. They were presented in just the way that second wave feminists had objected to—bits of their bodies, overall objectification, all of that.

AG: But these images were not addressed to women, they were meant for men—men’s fashion magazines, etc.

PCG: That’s right; women have nothing to do with it. There is a lot of interesting scholarship on this in cultural studies, done by people like Sean Nixon and Tim Edwards. They came up with the concept of the “homo social gaze” or “homo-spectatorial gaze” where men look at other men exactly as women have always looked at other women. This was the 80s—men using beauty products and going to the gym. People working in advertising started talking about the “new man,” interested in his appearance, in touch with his femininity, nice to women, doing the housework. At the same time cultural studies scholars began arguing there was no “new man”; it was just something the ad-men had invented. By the nineties, the term “new man” was taken ironically. And the “new lad” was identified with the publication of a magazine called Loaded.

AG: But the “new lad” is altogether different from the “new man,” isn’t he? He is a reaction, right?

PCG: Yes, it’s a whole different aesthetic. Loaded is basically soft pornography, whereas the men’s magazines of the 80s were not soft porn, they were about fashion and movie stars, and they were quite arty. GQ was imported from the U.S. They had these moody sepia covers with half-naked men on them. The “new lad” magazines of today have semi-naked women on the cover.

AG: So men’s magazines moved from soft porn to the “new man” back to soft porn again?

PCG: Well, the magazine got launched in the mid-nineties. Imelda Whelehan wrote a book on popular culture and feminism, by the way, which she called Overloaded because of this magazine. The full name of the magazine is Loaded: For Men Who Are Old Enough To Know Better. The “new lad” is consciously going back to the old ways of knocking about, drinking, refusing to be feminized in any way—girls, booze, football, a bit of fashion.
AG: How is the “New Lad” different from Playboy?

PCG: Playboy is older and more sophisticated. There is also the specter of social class, which doesn’t get discussed enough in cultural studies these days. The “new lad” is obviously working class.

AG: ...and so is the reader of Grazia, I’d assume. And yet you open the magazine and you see ads for 300-pound handbags... Isn’t that a bit of a contradiction? Who is buying these things?

PCG: Oh, people do buy them. They just go into debt. Grazia did a survey a while ago where they asked their readers, “Would you rather that somebody delivered the 300 pounds and upwards handbag of the season at your doorstep every three months, or would rather have all your personal debt cancelled?” Well, guess what they said? They wanted the handbag. They didn’t care about being in debt.

AG: Sounds like something straight out of Veblen. A whole century has passed, and he turns out to have been so very right about conspicuous consumption, except now it is not just the leisure class that do it.

PCG: Oh yes, Veblen is terribly important. Conspicuous consumption is what it’s all about. And now it takes the form of huge personal debt. That’s what Grazia is all about. You know that Britain leads the world in unsecured personal debt.

But to return to the male side of the gender divide—we haven’t talked about homophobia, which is quite crucial. David Beckham did a lot of good in this area. He appeared on three magazine covers: Marie Claire, The Face, and Attitude, which is a gay magazine. He became a big gay icon now, and said he was perfectly happy with that. Now, football is quite unrepentantly homophobic; the only footballer to have come out, who was also black, had killed himself. So Beckham was invoked as a metrosexual icon and broke through some of that.

In general, I would say that the masculine side of the gender divide in popular culture is very peculiar on homosexuality. Some of it is quite progressive, and some—like the Lock, Stock and Barrels films—represents the sort of closet homoeroticism that is quite fundamental to British society, and central to the behavior of young men engaged in “lad culture”—men jumping on each other on the football field, that sort of thing.
AG: Having looked through a few of these men’s magazines, I am struck by an aura of disgust and morbid fascination surrounding the body—the body parts, close-up pictures of gushing wounds. And the ostentatious heterosexuality tells us something about fear of homosexual desire as well.

PCG: Yes, I find this fascinating. It’s quite repulsive—pictures of tumors, of amputees. But then you also get this closet homoeroticism, pictures of footballers jumping on each other and kissing when they score a goal. It’s filled with fear—fear of your body, fear of being homosexual.

AG: What about body parts in the women’s mags—all those legs and arms of stars shown in close-up and examined for signs of anorexia?

PCG: It has nothing to do with anorexia. It is very difficult to theorize—the sort of pleasure involved here. It isn’t even, “Let’s look at her thighs.” It is, “Let’s look at her thighs.” You just look at stomach, bosoms, thighs, and shins. Privacy is violated. Hence the magazine titles: Look, Now and Closer. One of them had a cover last week that said, “body parts on the beach,” and it showed the most repulsive body parts of famous people. I think it was Courtney Love’s stomach that got the title of the most repulsive, because she was on a crash diet.

AG: Is it something about stardom itself that makes such a thing possible?

PCG: Yes, Richard Dyer made this point in the first really good study of stardom that was first published back in 1979. He said that stars have an “ordinariness” that tempers their extraordinariness. Well, now the extraordinariness isn’t there any more. We can just zoom in on their body parts, fragment them, consume them. The distance is all gone.

AG: A bit frightening, isn’t it? How can you stand dealing with all this awfulness on a daily basis? Is there any part of you that actually enjoys popular culture?

PCG: Oh yes, I enjoy some of it. I am not just interested in popular culture because you have to be interested as a cultural studies scholar, as someone who is leftwing and a feminist. I also enjoy bits of it because it quite simply is enjoyable.
I like watching Hollywood movies. The reason Hollywood dominates the world is not just because of American imperialism. Rather, Hollywood has the cultural imperialism it undeniably possesses precisely BECAUSE it has perfected the seamless, seductive, cinematic narrative that lures you in and holds you in its sway. And I do like watching Heritage films, despite the problems of ideological complicity we’ve discussed. There is pleasure in popular culture...

☐ **AG:** Some people would say you can’t study popular culture unless you enjoy it.

**PCG:** Yes, I agree with that. This is what worries me about some people’s apologetic attitude towards popular culture—“I study it because I must.” In England there is still a very strong legacy of F. R. Leavis: novels—good, popular culture—bad. I am not like that. I do enjoy it. Of course, I have my moments when I’ve had enough and pick up *Mansfield Park*, or Proust, or Wharton. But I don’t see why you can’t enjoy Proust and enjoy a well-made TV series as well.

☐ **AG:** True enough, but it’s not just the well-made plots you work with. It’s also the trashy, the gruesome, brutal, disturbing stuff.

**PCG:** It needs to be done. I want to talk about things that many scholars tend to avoid. Look at what is most successful commercially. Popular culture is like a barometer. You can’t be disinterested; it is happening for a reason, and as scholars of culture, we need to know what the reason is. You can’t afford not to know who Paris Hilton is. We have to accept that people are interested and try to understand why they are interested.

**Postscript – July 2008**

**PCG:** If we were doing the interview now, I would mention the 2007 film *Atonement* with Keira Knightley, and talk about how the novel is subtly changed by the director, Joe Wright, who also made *Pride and Prejudice*. He turned Ian McEwan’s novel into—guess what?—a glossy-looking Heritage film. Within our new celebrity-dominated consumer culture, what you might call the “Keira Factor” makes indifferent films into Oscar contenders. Her newest film *The Edge of Love* (2008)—just released in the U.K., directed by John Maybury and supposedly a biographical story about the love life of Dylan Thomas—has been taken up by the
fashion pages of magazines, the Dylan Thomas element ignored completely. I might also mention the David Beckham Armani underwear ads. A new one has just been unveiled in San Francisco, 100 foot high. These ads look very much like gay soft porn and carry the fetishization/objectification of the male body to new extremes. Beckham, of course, is now body beautiful, clothes-horse, celebrity parent—his origins as leading footballer seem forgotten.

**Works mentioned**


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