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Teaching Feminist Cultural Studies Using Popular Romance

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For almost ten years (2013–2022), I have been teaching a segment on popular romance as part of a course in feminist cultural studies on the introductory first term of Gender Studies at Stockholm University in Sweden. The course gives an overview of central cultural studies ideas and concepts, and trains the students in performing their own analyses of popular cultural texts and practices. The course is built around a central theme, namely the field of cultural studies' focus on questions of power and resistance. The ambition of me and my co-teacher on the course, gender and media scholar Hillevi Ganetz, has been to keep this dual focus present throughout all course segments: in the formulation of aims and outcomes, in the examination, and in the structuring of lectures and seminars.

When my department asked me to reshape parts of the cultural studies course into a shorter digital one, the popular romance segment stood out as an already condensed version of the course's overarching theme. The breadth, longevity, and fraught history of the simultaneously popular and abhorred romance genre has created a multitude of tensions, variations, and paradoxes—in texts, in production, and in reader, medial, and scholarly reception. This, I argue, makes the genre ideal for illustrating the central but at times simplified or neglected tension in cultural studies: namely, the co-existence of elements of cultural dominance and opposition in most, if not all, popular cultural contexts. I believe this attention to both power and resistance forms the basis of any nuanced critical analysis of ideology in popular culture phenomena. I also find it helpful for trying to teach independent, open-minded, and exploratory thinking to others.

Pedagogy

Overarchingly, the cultural studies course and its examination are structured around the dual focus on critical readings of dominant ideology in popular texts versus a focus on readers' active negotiations with them. Throughout the course, I have approached each lecture and seminar with one or more additional dualities in mind, and the ambition to keep

opposing or contradictory viewpoints co-present. Each time the students' discussions tip too much to one side or a consensus starts to emerge on how to interpret and value a popular cultural text or phenomenon, I try to counter and challenge their discussions with an opposing, alternative, or nuancing perspective. This pedagogical method, I believe, encourages the students' acquisition of knowledge along with their critical thinking, as it enables me to transfer knowledge about popular cultural history, texts, and theories, while actively withholding pre-packaged viewpoints or right ways of interpreting them. The romance course[1] is designed using this pedagogy, and its examination—consisting of several small written tasks performed continuously—reflects the expected learning outcomes, namely for the students to be able to account for and critically reflect on basic cultural studies perspectives on power and resistance in relation to popular romance. The course consists of five segments:

1. An introduction to feminist cultural studies
2. An introduction to popular romance
3. An overview of common ways of speaking of romance literature and women's reading
4. A few basic ways of interpreting romantic texts and formulas
5. A few different ways of understanding the joys of romance reading

First, a brief introduction is made to the field of feminist cultural studies, connecting its historical roots to the first generation of romance studies, when feminist scholars intervened in the then male-dominated field of cultural studies by focusing on feminine popular genres and female audiences. It is namely among these feminist studies of soap operas, women's magazines, teen idols, bedroom cultures, and women's text-mediated sociality that I place the first influential studies of popular romance, highlighting especially the foundational *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* by Janice Radway. Thereafter, the course introduces some basic tools for cultural analysis: Stuart Hall's influential description of *representation* is used to illustrate how dominant ideology is reproduced through popular texts and his theories on *encoding/decoding* describe the importance of context and readers for the production—and reformulation—of medial messages. Also here, Radway's study is used to illustrate cultural studies' theoretical and methodological pluralism and the example-setting analytical focus on all parts of medial communication: on production, text, and reception.

Second, the course introduces the romance genre with a short discussion of qualifiers: from Radway's narrow formula to Pamela Regis' more open "essential elements," as well as the broad and permissive definition of the Romance Writers of America. A brief historical overview of the romance genre is also made, intended to demonstrate both historical continuity and change, as well as the genre's normativity along with some of its many variations.

Third, an overview is made of the derogatory view of popular romance, discussing historical and contemporary misogynist views on feminine mass-culture and female readers. This segment also touches on that form of feminist critique against popular romance that simply states rather than demonstrates the gender conservatism of the genre. To contrast these examples of generalizing contemptuous views, the segment also presents the contemporary tendency to—in a sometimes equally simplifying way—promote romance as progressive, inclusive, and feminist (illustrated in the course by discussing examples of the

popular feminism of contemporary Swedish romance promotion) (e.g. Abrahamsson, *Superwomen*).

The course's fourth segment focuses on textual analysis of romantic literature. A lot of weight is here given to those influential types of reading that criticize the gender ideology of romance texts. Radway's and Tania Modleski's influential analyses are presented, along with more recent examples of analyses that criticize the gender politics of modern romance (in this course illustrated especially by my own research on the heteronormativity of the gender equality ideals expressed in contemporary Swedish popular romance) (Abrahamsson, *Superwomen*). Further, this segment introduces and problematizes the, for the field of cultural studies, central concept "the male gaze" (Mulvey) by presenting a number of ways that it has been employed by feminist romance scholars, e.g. analyses of the heroines' to-be-looked-at-ness (e.g. Modleski), the hero's reactive gaze (e.g. Hirdman), the reversed gaze when the heroine observes and eroticizes the hero (e.g. Larsson), and a queer gaze that here focuses on the reader's possibility to eroticize both hero, heroine, and themself, as well as other elements in the pleasure-inducing portrayals of settings and situations (e.g. Burley; Abrahamsson, *Enahanda*).

Finally, the course introduces different ways of understanding the reading of popular romance. Radway's study is included also here, and especially her analysis of the affective and ideological significance of the act of reading. This segment of the course puts special weight on the positive experiences that attract readers to romance reading, such as pleasure, comfort, and feelings of empowerment and community. The segment invites a discussion on why readers turn to fiction, borrowing concepts from among others Rita Felski, such as enchantment and recognition. It also tries to complicate simplistic views of fantasy and wish-fulfilment by, e.g., referring students to the humoristic celebrations of escapism made in the television commercials for the novels of publisher Harlequin.

Outcome

In the introduction to the anthology *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction* (Frantz & Selinger), the editors discuss the continued influence of those early romance studies that, from the field of feminist cultural studies in the 1980s, studied the ideological effects of romance reading. They especially criticize the generalizations these studies made of the genre, and their implicit focus on the arguably moralizing question "Are these books good or bad for their readers?" (5). I agree that there has, and continues to be, a great need for more serious, deep, and nuanced scholarly engagement with romance literature. However, I also want to argue for the continued importance of the ideological and contextual focus of feminist cultural studies when teaching and studying popular romance. The field of feminist cultural studies does not only attempt to answer whether romance novels are oppressive or emancipatory for their readers, but also why such questions are more often posed to women's genres, and why romance scholars and fans may be so sick of hearing them. When cultural studies balances, rather than seeks to solve, this central tension of power and resistance, it can make room for complex and multi-faceted analyses of literary texts as well as of their cultural and ideological significance and their importance for individual and communities of readers. The question the field poses—and that can help

students structure their independent learning and knowledge production— should however not be whether romance is emancipatory or oppressive, good or bad, but rather how and why the genre has and must be understood as both.

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[1] The course is entitled GV5004: Makt och motstånd i romance-genren [Power and Resistance in Popular Romance].

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