

# Blurring Boundaries

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Barbara Creed

MEDIA MATRIX: SEXING THE NEW REALITY

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IN 1984 BRITISH feminist Rosalind Coward published a collection of essays, *Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today*, which had considerable impact because of its explanatory power, and because it made available a particular interpretation of feminist approaches to everyday cultural forms, from food porn to astrology, fashion to romance novels. At that time, media representations and popular understandings of feminism were distorted and often stereotypical. They had not caught up on the more nuanced and diverse critical thinking filtering through the activist networks and academy. Coward's book charted new directions in thinking through feminism and thinking about feminism.

Barbara Creed's *Media Matrix: Sexing the New Reality* is such a book. It intersects with the present preoccupation with new global media forms and their implications for how we think about sex and the public. While the differences within feminism have long since made it impossible to write a book that accurately represents any singular feminist approach, *Media Matrix* sets out the cardinal theoretical points informing feminist critical theory: postmodernism, psychoanalysis, queer theory, globalisation. It also introduces key feminist writers over a range of cultural forms that one way or another make contact with feminine identity.

As a film theorist, Creed brings a distinctive voice to discussions of wider forms of media and visual culture, from reporting on 'terror' to the queer carnivalesque, digitised syntheses to cybersex. Creed also transcends an imperative for the new that sometimes seems to operate in critical theory and that can cycle, almost like fashion, through particular writers. Freud continues to have descriptive use in her analyses of perversion, abjection and fantasy, and their peculiar and complex interplay between screen and spectator. Creed never takes half measures in her deployment of theoretical terms: if she's going to talk about voyeurism, it will have the rigour of correct use, but with accessible explanation of terms.

With characteristically deceptive simplicity, Creed writes, 'in film "to screen" thus has a double and contradictory meaning: to show and to cover'. Cinema has thus produced

a particular historical subject, a voyeur with an insatiable desire for the new, the real, the shocking and a fascination in sexuality — while it draws on psychic structures that are 'the realities of human nature'. These historical and psychic conditions have not situated the cinema spectator as passive, however, and Creed is faithful to a postmodern orthodoxy: meaning does not reside in a text but is actively produced by the viewer.

One of *Media Matrix's* pleasures lies in its surprising but perfectly sensible ideas. With *Big Brother*, Creed traces reality television back to ethnographic documentary, but argues that this scrutiny of the 'primitive' has been turned towards the Western modern subject. In *Sex and the City*, she sees single women as treating sex as a commodity — shopping for sex in the urban jungle. While the programme represents a new sexual permissiveness, it regulates this within certain limits, and Mr Right hovers over each episode.

Creed explores the significance of women producing pornographic texts and argues that *Baise-Moi*, *Romance* and *Annie Sprinkle* have 'taken back explicit sexual images that have been colonised by the porn industry'. Like *The Story of O*, they explore the possibilities of women's sexuality in a heterosexual phallogocentric and misogynist social order. It is unsurprising, therefore, that these are confronting texts. In the gang-rape scene in *Baise-Moi*, one of the women characters reacts with complete passivity. Creed highlights a difficult but forceful point by the director Virginie Despentes: the misrecognition between women's physical responses to pleasure and terror in the mind of the rapist. As a commercial venture and a representational genre, porn is erected on transgression, and this appropriation and reworking of its conventions within art practice and mainstream cinema

by women is genuinely exciting. In the decades of writing around pornography, this essay shifts the ground further than anything I have read since Lyn Hunt's *The Invention of Pornography* or Linda Williams's *Hardcore*.

'Blurring boundaries' and 'disrupt' are terms that recur throughout *Media Matrix*, sometimes, it seems, as intrinsic and unqualified virtues. In her final essay, Creed proposes a new metaphor of identity in a 'global self' emerging through interactive communication technologies in response to 'the transformative powers of the media', particularly the Internet. This identity is by its nature political through its fluidity across traditional barriers. Throughout Creed's book, this same dogged pursuit of the subversive potential of media forms, particularly in relation to gender and sexual identity, takes precedence. This is another aspect of Creed's distinct voice and why *Media Matrix* is an important innovation.