# *I cannot say it was 'love at first sight'—but…*

A conversation with Angela McRobbie
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by Ester Gendusa
(Università degli Studi di Palermo)
and Emanuele Monegato
(Università degli Studi di Milano)

ANGELA McROBBIE is Professor Emerita at Goldsmiths College (University of London) and fellow of the British Academy. She is a cultural sociologist and feminist media scholar, trained at the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies under the leadership of Stuart Hall. Her recent books are *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience* (2020), *Fashion as Creative Economy* (2022, with Daniel Strutt and Carolina Bandinelli), *Ulrike Ottinger, Film, Art and the Ethnographic Imagination* (2024), and *Feminism, Young Women and Cultural Studies: The Birmingham Essays from 1957 Onwards* (2024).

**Ester Gendusa:** How did you first encounter Cultural Studies? Was it 'love at first sight'?

**Angela McRobbie:** I had graduated in English Literature and Sociology at Glasgow University in 1974. I understood there could be a middle ground between these two disciplines where I could do research on the popular magazines of young women such as *Jackie* magazine. But it was not an acceptable topic for research in any of the

traditional universities, only in Birmingham, where I had heard about Cultural Studies, did it seem possible. There was a fledgling 'Sociology of Literature' in one or two departments, and some people had looked at Sociology of Mass Media; just as I was leaving, Glasgow University set up its Glasgow Media Research Group but it was a pretty male dominated set up, with no interest at all in 'teenage girls'.
However, once in Birmingham, I cannot say it was 'love at first sight'. I arrived in the moment of 'high theory' and there was only a bare handful of women students and they all felt alienated. The theory pathway was dominated by Louis Althusser at his most abstruse. I had studied a lot of good quality Marxist sociology at Glasgow, but I had never heard of Althusser. Also, at Glasgow there was no attention to psychoanalysis so that too was a challenge. I found myself in the 'Subcultures Sub-group' which was appropriate but, again, it was very much a boys' scene. It took me a good bit of a while to establish a more autonomous vocabulary for studying young women. Indeed, the 'guys' felt it was a betrayal because with the emphasis on working-class culture and politics, they felt could easily fold in the gender question! Well, this was wrong. So, I struggled to write three or four articles defending my position. Fortunately, they seemed to ring true and were immediately referred to, cited, used on degree courses and translated into several languages but looking back, to be honest, it was an uphill struggle.

**Emanuele Monegato:** How did you experience the porosity between the social ferment in 1970s/1980s England and the academic environment in Britain?

**Angela McRobbie:** We were all young at Birmingham. Me in my mid-20s. Almost all of us were caught up in various external political and cultural projects. From 1976 punk happened and that suddenly made a kind of feminism visible through music, 'women's only' discos', Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League.
It was also an exciting and a dangerous time. There were also all sorts of women's projects in the city that were also quite near to the university, such as joint childcare and crèche initiatives. Then women artists got together and organised around feminist art and the 'domestic sphere'. Like many women at that time I got married young and had my daughter in 1976, so I was writing a thesis about the sexism of girls' magazines, while also caring for a small child, and of course attracted to the nightlife of local left-wing bands, especially the Au Pairs. My husband was also studying, and we had a small house close to campus, often the Birmingham CCCS people would drop by for a beer on the way home so there was a lot going on.

**Ester Gendusa:** During your years at the CCCS working alongside Stuart Hall, in which terms did you feel that you, as a group of intellectuals, were actively contributing to the transformation of Western interpretative paradigms?

**Angela McRobbie:** I don't think we felt that at the time. It was more a matter of what tools we could find to do research on the topics we felt were important. To be honest, I

think we assumed no one really would be interested bar a tiny number. At the CCCS often groups of young left-wing academics would visit, especially from Italy and Germany. They were interested in our work, for example on football hooligans or pop music or Marxist theory. We certainly did not think many doors would open to us as our subjects were not taught widely in the UK universities at the time. Despite the articles we wrote and the *Stencilled Papers* which were quite quickly re-printed all over the place, despite this, many of us found it hard to get academic jobs.

**Emanuele Monegato:** How did it feel to be engaged, committed, and radical in the CCCS years?

**Angela McRobbie**: I can only speak for myself, but I would say there was a huge wave of activism and commitment. Radical politics was a 'way of life'. But there were also questions like "How are we going to get jobs and make a living?", "Would academics accept us?" "How was it possible to succeed with the duties of motherhood?" Writing articles, trying to get wider political engagement as a public intellectual, for me this meant writing a lot for *the New Statesman* and then for *The Independent* and *The Guardian*, and of course for *Marxism Today*. There were always conferences and then eventually interest in our work from outside the UK, there were the big US conferences some of which I went to, others I stayed home and did the school run.

**Ester Gendusa:** How would you describe your encounter with Stuart Hall and the CCCS?

**Angela McRobbie:** Stuart was a unique person, when I first knew him at CCCS I was quite overwhelmed by his magnificent style and his huge knowledge. The way he taught was just fantastic, and I have long wished we could have emulated it. For the MA classes he would just come in with a pile of books and with post-it notes indicating where he wanted to focus on. Then, he would teach 'off the cuff' for a couple of hours. The texts themselves were always interesting as if it was just what he was reading at the time. Sociologists like Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman. Or Pierre Bourdieu. It must have varied from year to year. In any case, he would teach, but as there were only three staff members and about fifty students, it was very much up to us to self-organise through the subgroups. Stuart was also incredibly busy, so in any one week he was possibly doing fifteen different things.

**Emanuele Monegato:** In your view, what is the legacy of Stuart Hall and the experience of the CCCS, both in the UK and internationally?

**Angela McRobbie:** Stuart's legacy is immense and justly so. Former students like myself would never have had that opportunity in the other universities in the UK, it was a kind of academic freedom to be inter-disciplinary, to roam around and read so widely.
Indeed, recently I thought how at the CCCS it was expected of a student like me, who in conventional academic terms was studying 'young women and popular magazines', absolutely had to read and take part in seminars about e.g. British radical working-class

history. One could not meaningfully take part unless one had read e.g. Edward P. Thompson or Christopher Hill etc. One simply had to be familiar with Antonio Gramsci, Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, then with the writing of feminists like Juliet Mitchell. Of course, this breadth meant most of us were slow to finish the actual degrees, but it did mean that working collaboratively and in groups we published articles and chapters early on.

**Ester Gendusa:** What is your perspective on the future of Cultural Studies? Do you believe it remains a thriving field, or do you sense it is undergoing a scientific "dilution" that risks weakening its radical edge?

**Angela McRobbie:** I think the strange thing is that the other disciplines have absorbed Cultural Studies and integrated modules from across the range of Cultural Studies topics into their own dominant field. This is true across Modern Languages, the Social Sciences, Fine Arts, Design Studies, Fashion Studies, and Performance and Theatre Studies. The downside is that specific Master's Courses in Cultural Studies are no longer attracting students in large numbers, but this is also because the UK media and government bodies suggest that it is not good for 'employability'. Overall I am in favour of Cultural Studies' being part of the curriculum of the arts, humanities and social sciences provision in the UK. This may well be the most successful pathway from the original CCCS undertaking. It is also worth pointing out that some of my own research as well as that of Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall remains on the UK school 'national curriculum'.

**Emanuele Monegato:** Do you feel that teaching Cultural Studies allows young generations (of students and teachers) to be aware of interplay between language and political/institutional power?

**Angela McRobbie:** Yes, for sure. But it is usually the key concepts in Cultural Studies that make the field important for students. There are so many that it is hard to summarise. But I can name a few of those that have had lasting value from those early days, for instance the "structure of feeling", and "culture is ordinary" (from Raymond Williams), then from Althusser the "ideological state apparatus" and from Antonio Gramsci of course "hegemony". Stuart Hall really made great use of these concepts throughout his writing. My research on *Jackie magazine* relied on these concepts and also on the famous 'encoding and decoding' semiological analysis of popular media which Stuart Hall had pioneered. But also enormously important on the longer term has been Paul Gilroy's writing on "the Black Atlantic".

**Ester Gendusa:** In what ways has Cultural Studies influenced your life, personally, professionally, and as an educator?

**Angela McRobbie:** Well, it has provided an academic pathway and a methodology, it has also permitted the range of topics I have researched consistently, from the early work through to creative economy to all the feminist theory on 'post-feminism'.

**Emanuele Monegato:** In 1977 you pioneered the analysis of girls' magazines like *Jackie* through a feminist lens, revealing the ideological shaping of young femininity. Yet, despite today's fragmented social media landscape, the disciplining of girlhood through consumer culture persists, even intensifies. How do you explain such a continuity within these structural media transformations?

**Angela McRobbie:** I have written an article about the shift to digital magazine formats and what this means. It can be found in the new collection titled *Feminism, Young Women and Cultural Studies: The Birmingham Essays from 1975 Onwards* (2024) published by the Goldsmiths Press. Indeed, the main answer to your question is worked through across the two volumes *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) and *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience* (2020). In both cases I use the Foucauldian concept of 'technology of the self' and from there I develop a range of other concepts to understand this self-disciplining process, such as 'luminosity', 'post-feminist masquerade' etc.

**Ester Gendusa:** In the early 2000s you sharply critiqued the rise of "neoliberal feminism," warning that individual empowerment narratives would obscure structural inequalities. Now, in Part 1 of *Feminism, Young Women and Cultural Studies* (2024), you observe young women's growing disillusionment with meritocracy. Given this critical moment, what conditions would be necessary for a revival of collective feminist politics among young women?

**Angela McRobbie:** The 2009 book is extended in *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience (2020)*. The overall project involves an attempt sociologically to track the alignments of political culture with popular culture during the period of the New labour government in the UK, led by the PM Tony Blair. In both cases I develop a conjunctural analysis influenced by Stuart Hall. In the more recent work I have argued that the meritocracy and the 'top girl' phenomenon which are key features of the neoliberal programme in the UK begin to weaken after 2012, and this accumulates with the Trump election of 2016. Suddenly the post-feminist idea that there is no need for feminism, becomes obviously unviable. There is wider awareness of gender-based violence or street harassment or discrimination in the workplace…not to mention domestic violence. In Hall's term there is an "exhaustion of consent" (Hall *et al*. 218-272) and a new wave of feminist protest and organisation.

**Emanuele Monegato:** Since the ideal target readers of this issue of *Altre Modernità* are prospective teachers of English Studies in Italian high schools willing to adopt a culturalist analytical framework in their lesson plans, which publication among those you authored would you recommend to them? And why would you opt for that specific work?

**Angela McRobbie:** I think the new collection which includes all the 'early work' as well as four or five updates is very useful for teachers as I deliberately wrote the new material

with an idea of first year students and even 6th formers in mind. But I also think for teachers the material on post-feminism could be important. There is a good spread of other articles that have been reprinted and translated so many times—I think they must be more or less 'classics'. One is called "Club to Company". Another is called "Top Girls".

**Ester Gendusa:** In Part 1 of *Feminism, Young Women and Cultural Studies* (2024), you outline what might be described as a new mosaic of female subjectivities emerging in the contemporary age: within this framework, (mediated) representations of resilience and entrepreneurialism are often framed against the backdrop of a dismantled welfare state. These coexist with the alternative model of politically-aware teenage girls who challenge fast fashion and capitalist norms through their conscious choice to buy second-hand clothing. On the other hand, vulnerability is being theorised in multiple nuances. Do you think it may offer a viable synthesis paving the way to renewed feminist affective economies? Or am I proposing a far-reaching hypothesis?

**Angela McRobbie:** Well, yes, I think you are right. This is exactly the terrain that I have always tried to map out. Thank you for putting it so well. Patriarchal structures of dominance keep on finding new ways of operating. Under the influence of the new Trump administration, we see all sorts of DEI (Diversity, Equality, Inclusion) initiatives being closed down, there is a new much more brutal backlash against feminism. There is a backlash against anti-racism. There is a new authoritarianism on every corner. There is the threat to women's reproductive rights. Things I personally thought would never be reversed e.g. abortion, contraception, gay marriage, etc. all are now being eroded.

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**Ester Gendusa** (MA, PhD) is a research fellow at the University of Palermo, where she teaches English language and translation. The author of the first Italian monograph focusing on Bernardine Evaristo's literary production, *Identità nere e cultura europea* (2014), she has published extensively on post-colonial and (Black) British authors. Her most recent research interests lie in the interplay between language and power in contemporary multimodal discursive arenas, particularly in the representation of antinormative identities in news media as well as in British and American films.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0790-9845

ester.gendusa@unipa.it

**Emanuele Monegato** (PhD) explores English dynamite literature and post-9/11 fiction through the lens of Cultural Studies and complements his research interests with a growing focus on the didactics of Cultural Studies and teacher training, particularly within secondary and higher education contexts. He is co-editor of the textbook *Letterature e culture inglesi. Temi e (con)testi dal XIX secolo a oggi* (Pearson, 2024) with N. Vallorani and P. Caponi. He is currently teaching English language and literature at a secondary school in Milan and also serves as editor-in-chief of Altre Modernità, UNIMI, where he co-edited the 2017 issue *Gli Studi Culturali e l'università italiana*.

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5353-7651

emanuele.monegato@unimi.it

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