行政院國家科學委員會專題研究計畫　成果報告

「輕浮」、「濫情」的大眾女性讀物、文本消費、市景閱讀和世紀之交的倫敦城市小說

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報告內容

前言：

本人一項對都市文學尤其是倫敦文學具有濃厚興趣，最近三年研究，聚焦在世紀之交倫敦女性和都市現代性及商品文化的題材，分別從新興女性的馬路行走、在百貨公司逛覽以及閱讀消費大眾女性刊物這三個層面探討女性進入城市公共領域，經歷都市現代性和商品文化過程中的種種社經文化議題，2003 年的國科會計畫是本人探討女性參於都市現代性的最後部分—現代倫敦小說中描述中下階層女性對首次大量發行的大眾女性（浪漫）讀物的消費和閱讀。本人運用相關理論，並以寫成初稿。

研究目的和方法：

本計畫探討新興女性參與現代都市商品文化的另一重要部分—藉閱讀/消費大眾女性刊物來閱讀/熟悉商品化和景觀化的城市市景，對世紀之交的倫敦女性來說，在商業休閒區的馬路行走和百貨公司商品瀏覽和購物之外，閱讀流行女性刊物也是同樣具有瀏覽樂趣的消費行為；也同樣和現代時期的商品文化一樣，同時期的大眾女性讀物體現出維護帝國、忠於王室的立場（Rappaport 114-15），顯示其同樣深處都市現代化的社經歷史脈絡。儘管閱讀女性通俗讀物是現代新興女性參與商品文化的重要一環，但此議題向來受到漠視，這和大眾女性讀物這個文類所受到的價值評判有關，除了經典/通俗的價值對立外，女性讀物連在通俗文學/文化裡面也被視為位階最低、最過於保守（Modleski 1982: 14），這無非是相較於其他被視為男性化、較注重邏輯和動作（如偵探或冒險故事）的文類來說，女性讀物被視為女性化、瑣碎、不理性的性別建構。十九世紀末女性主義儘管肯定當時女性讀物鼓勵女性參與城市公共領域，但卻批判其幻想逃避、毫無節制、即刻滿足的濫情和縱欲，到二十世紀六七十年代，女性主義者 (Firestone, Greer)更是嚴詞批判其以濫情快感作為「糖衣」哄騙女性接受貞潔、壓抑性慾和忍耐、被動的的父權價值，灌輸女性讀者「迷戀囚禁她們的枷鎖」(Firestone 180)，此種觀點和法蘭克福學派 (Adorno 1975: 47) 批判大眾文化幫助資本主義意識型態矇騙操縱讀者接受「虛假意識」的評論如出一轍，也在對女性讀者全然被動、判斷力低下的負面批評上，反而和傳統男性評論家鄙斥浪漫小說如女性一樣頭腦脆弱、情感氾濫、缺乏理性的言詞有某種異曲同工的效用。近年來女性主義大眾文化學者開始大量投入大眾女性文類（如浪漫小說、肥皂劇和女性雜誌等）的研究，也從讀者調查、文本分析、意義的使用/消費相對於意義的生產/規範、以及借鑒女性主義電影觀看(Spectatorship)理論、心理分析界 LaPlanche and Pontalis 的幻想理論(fantasy)等角度，指出女性對大眾文類的閱讀和使用、也有脫離和抵抗文本權力、採用不同流動性主體位置的空間。本人在今年剛完成一篇探討大眾文學的快感議題的論文（現正審查中），從理論層面就快感的共謀性、抵抗性以及由晚進心理分析領域的幻想理論角度來探討大眾文學閱讀過程的種種主動和被動議題，因此對

具體體現在世紀之交時期的大眾女性（浪漫）刊物閱讀及其在當時吉辛和毛姆的倫敦小說中的文學再現，具有濃厚興趣及相當準備，再加上這種閱讀和本人一向關注的女性和現代都市商品文化的密切聯繫，故希望在新計畫裡進一步探討這個未受到學界足夠重視的議題，也完成本人研究女性參與現代商品文化的最後一部分。

本計畫的第二個重點就是世紀之交女性大眾讀物不同於以前的注重展示和炫目商品景觀、因爾產生的將女性讀者視為消費者、女性閱讀刊物連帶至女性閱讀商品化都市景觀的特性。將女性讀物和女性經歷現代商品消費文化做個連結，將前者視為和逛百貨公司、行走街頭具有同樣心神渙散、流動多變、享受瀏覽樂趣的特性，是本計畫的一大特點。近來文化研究領域有關都市現代性和消費文化的研究風起雲湧(Andrew and Talbot, Chang, Falk and Campbell)，在文學批評領域，Rachel Bowlby 詳細探討了 1850 年代的百貨公司業主以消費者之姿訴求於和建構女性的經過，本計畫則指出世紀之交的大眾女性讀物以讀者和消費者的形象訴求於女性，女性讀者隨意翻閱、瀏覽，可隨時停下、也同時被豐富炫目的內涵心神分散，如同逛街一樣，她們將片段、多樣、變換的內容拼湊成對同樣不斷變換的都市市景的最新信息和較完整印象，因此也並不是完全沒有主動創造的空間。 世紀之交大眾女性讀物的紛繁多樣內容所導致的重要特性就是其產生的心神渙散的效果，這個概念以班雅明的論點為架構，班雅明的”distraction”論點受到 Kracauer1926 年的”Cult of Distraction”影響，Kracauer 認為現代電影將大眾觀眾的注意力分散、打亂到明星等炫目的表面外在，而脫離傳統布爾喬亞藝術欣賞方式的聚精注重內在藝術價值，是指向了大眾所處的現實世界的紛亂，也是體現大眾從下而上的審美上的反對（布爾喬亞）力量，體現大眾具有建設性和生產性的力量（293）。班雅明在談到現代電影時，就承繼並發展了這種觀點，布爾喬亞審美過程就是要求對藝術聚精會神的尊崇和理解(absorption)，以及不受打擾、單獨私自的沈浸，但是現代大眾文化如電影的欣賞方式則是 distraction，這種方式並不是只是不注意(inattention)，而是注意力一直注意到其他不斷出現的紛繁東西上(attention paid elsewhere)，雖然映接不暇，但也讓觀眾的感官異常敏感鋒利，更為清醒，更能有利於觀眾對藝術的「感官上」的據用(tactile appropriation)以及更為主動、批評的評判(Illuminations 242)。世紀之交女性大眾讀物的紛繁、炫目的內容，在相當層面上確實展現商業文化試圖操縱大眾，也確實如阿多諾在批評班雅明的”distraction”論點時指出的無法脫離/掩蓋資本剝削大眾的實質(AP 123)，但阿多諾仍然以首重傳統布爾喬亞聚精會神的藝術欣賞方式來貶低現代大眾文化的 distraction 無非只是缺乏意識和理性的「幼稚化」「不注意」，則顯然對現代大眾文化異於傳統的新內涵缺乏足夠細膩的敏覺，世紀之交大眾女性讀物的大體重複、又每次有不同細節和外表、不斷片短連載的結構，綿綿不斷又不失開放，似乎更好提供讀者認識一個同樣是延棉不斷紛雜景觀的現代市景；而看似漫無目的又永不休止的瑣碎八卦、讀者來信和函覆專欄，則加強了女性讀者的群體感，體現了班雅明所說的心神渙

散相異於傳統藝術獨自欣賞的集體感，幫助女性讀者以群體涉入都市公共空間時的知識和信心。

文獻探討

對大眾女性讀物的關注、以及將世紀之交女性閱讀/消費大眾讀物和女性參與商品文化、經歷都市現代性連結起來，是本計畫的特色，吉辛的研究在國內向來缺乏，近年來，吉辛作品因反應現代都市性、商品文化和新興女性的議題，從而掀起新的研究興趣（Harman, Ledger, Selig），其中研究多集中在性別分工領域的打破上，但對女性角色閱讀的女性通俗讀物尚未有人研究；同樣，毛姆的研究本來也缺乏，其中女性讀物更是無人觸及（曼斯菲爾德也是如此）。本計畫希望因此而提出新的角度，以對女性和都市現代性的議題及其在現代文學的再現有更詳盡的挖掘。

結果與討論

本計畫的理論架構資料蒐集完備，本人至倫敦大英圖書館蒐集女性雜誌和出版物史料、成果相當豐富，與預期目標基本吻合。最後已完成學術論文的初稿（參見下文）。

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計畫成果自評

原計畫資料蒐集所獲甚豐，最後完成相當成果的論文初稿，參見附錄。

附錄：

Women's "Frothy", "Trashy" Readings: Textual Consumption, Cityscape Reading and Some Turn-of-the-Century London Fictions

Eva Chen

With the increasing commercialization of the shopping and leisure centers in London's turn-of-the century urban cityscape, middle-class and lower-middle-class women have become a ubiquitous public presence in these urban centers. An important part of these women's experience of the new urban culture is their reading/consumption of the rapidly mushrooming popular publications. These

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so-called "trashy" publications[1] emphasize visual display, commodity advertisements and fashion/entertainment advice on top of a serialized romance story. This study treats women's reading of these publications as constituent of their participation in the new commodity culture and as part of their efforts to read/understand the text of the cityscape and to fashion a new public feminine self. Using the London novels of the period (mostly Gissing), the study explores the reading positions of these women characters, and argues that, while indeed subject to the manipulative social, cultural, and economic forces behind the operations of these popular publications, these women readers are not entirely without the potential of resistive use or active choice. The emphasis on variety, spectacle and short length of these serialized feminine publications leads to the distracted and fragmentary nature of the reading process, giving rise to a "browsing" experience of fantasy, distracted pleasure and play, similar in nature to cinema-going and department-store-browsing, two other quintessentially modern urban experiences.

Women's Readings and the New Journalism

The late Victorian period has witnessed a fundamental change both in the book market and the reading public as a combined result of technological revolutions and education policy reforms. The removal of the advertisement and stamp duties in 1853 and 1855 and of the taxes on paper and rags in 1860 and 1861 sparked the growth of the publishing industry. The mechanization of paper making, type casting and typesetting, the introduction of fast rotary presses, the rapid development of processes for reproducing photographs, and other revolutionary changes at every level of the production press, provides a technological boost to the rise of a cheap and efficient mass press that catered to the millions (Rappaport 112). The 1870 Education Act, which provided for the first time a comprehensive system of primary education in England, had by the 1890s produced the first generations of a mass readership which extended down the social scale as never before. An example of these mass readers is provided by a contemporary writer, who cites "clerks and artisans, shopgirls, dressmakers, and milliners, who pour into London every morning by the early trains" (Reppelier 209). Another contemporary writer Thomas Wright further pinpoints the "young ladies of the counters … and of the dressmaking and millinery professions" as the major reader for the women's mass publications (282). These urban-working,

[1] Unless otherwise specified, information on the mass periodicals and women's periodicals provided in this paper is the result of research undertaken by this author in the Newspaper Library of the British Library, London. The mass women's periodicals addressed in this paper include a variety of illustrated papers, domestic magazines and also cheap romance serials. These all share a more or less similar content structure, with serialized romance stories as the anchor, and tit-bit information and fashion generously interspersed here and there. The ratio may vary somewhat, with the weekly romance serials leaning more heavily on the romance stories, while the illustrated and domestic journals devoting more space to miscellany.

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suburbia-dwelling, and daily-commuting "quarter-educated" (Gissing 1996: 467) masses, constitute a ready readership for the cheap mass publications mostly sold in the hundreds of thousands, and together they constitute a new reading phenomenon dubbed condescendingly by Matthew Arnold as the New Journalism.

Arnold, writing about the "new voters" and the new "democracy" and the New Journalism that catered for these masses, half-jokingly "recommend[ed]" the New Journalism's "ability, novelty, variety, sensation, sympathy, generous instincts", while seriously lambasting its "one great fault"—"featherbrained" (638-39). The "recommendations" are half-hearted, because in Arnold's famous Culture and Anarchy polemic against a philistine society, his position on the side of the solid, rational, and tradition-informed serious readings is beyond doubt. Sensation, sympathy, instincts are thus words that, to Arnold, compromise instead of compliment. The word "featherbrained", the most serious charge reserved for the new journalism, mobilizes particularly the vocabulary of gendered identity, and highlights not just the differences in quality that Arnold envisages between the New Journalism and the preferred, educated readings, but also the widespread fears of "feminization" of the press brought by the new mass publications. Fears of democratization, involving the dimension of class, are also often couched in gender terms.

This is especially interesting as the role of women is indeed prominent in the New Journalism, which is not just cheap, mass-circulating, technology-aided and advertisement-laden, but also to a significant extent about, for, and, for the first time in some instances, by women. It is in this period that magazines for women, including a variety of penny weekly romances and illustrated papers, moved to the place they have ever since occupied at the center of mass publishing, a phenomenon that has continued onto this day (Beetham 122). Harmsworth, publisher of *Home Chat*, one of the best-selling women's penny magazines of the period with a first print run of 200,000 copies (*Home Chat* 95), identified "woman appeal" as crucial to the New Journalism (Clarke 84). Between 1880 and 1900 alone, more than 200 new magazines especially for women were founded (Beetham 122), some penned and edited by women. Though most were short-lived, some, like *Home Chat*, survived until the mid-twentieth century (Ballster 106). Even general journals like *Tit-Bits*, which pioneered the New Journalism and was the most popular penny weekly of the late 19th century with an average circulation of 400,000 to 600,000 (Jackson 203), envisaged an important woman reader in its famous domestic advice section and "Answers to Correspondents" column (with women letter-writers constituting the majority), its romantic fiction serialization and its many advertisements featuring mostly women's fashion and products (Jackson 203). The journal, famously parodied by Gissing as *Chit-Chat* in his novel *New Grub Street* (1891), credits its very origin to a female

influence, as Newnes (publisher from 1881 to 1910) claimed that the idea for the journal came to him when he was reading aloud to his wife over the tea-table "tit-bits" from the newspaper (Friederichs 55). Not to be outdone by Harmsworth, Newnes himself quickly launched his own women's magazine *Woman's Life*, which was later revamped as *Woman's Own*, a dominating force still going strong in today's publishing market (Beetham 192-93).

In contrast to such enthusiastic embracing of the women reader by the publishing industry, established critics and writers have often expressed deep reservations, if not downright condemnation. Indeed, fears of feminization are behind many of the charges unleashed against the new mass publications.[2] Instead of the authoritative, instructive tone delivering impersonal judgments that were so favored by the mid-Victorian journals, these late-19th century and early 20th century mass publications strive at the personal and the human, with the editor posing as a friend rather than an authority (Beetham 124). The invention of the gossip columns and the interview, two new journalistic genres that became widely popular at this time, epitomizes the personal angle. The overall tone is thus intimate, and often chatty, which appeals enormously to the female reader but also opens itself to accusations of triviality. Another charge often levied against the mass publications is their perceived irrationality, subjectivity, and thus what Arnold terms as "sensation" (638). These publications' widespread use of emotive headlines, cross headings and the interview, and their predilection for stories of crime, adventure and erotic romance, do seem to substantiate the charge. Where women's mass publications are concerned, serialized and often unashamedly sentimental romance stories make up a large proportion, interspersed with commodity ads and "tit-bit" columns of gossip. The weekly installment arrangement seems to fashion a fragmentary, repetitive romance plot that runs on and on without an obvious structure or a clear beginning, progression and resolution/ending, providing further ammunition to the charge that these mass readings are almost entirely without value.

A close examination of these women's readings leads to several significant findings. First, with their amazing circulation and wide readership, a large chunk of the latter being first-time readers equipped for the first time with the basic education necessary for leisure reading, these turn-of-the-century mass women's readings could be credited as pioneering en masse the genre of the popular romance story. Though many such periodicals are littered with miscellany and trivia, the serialized romance story still constitutes the backbone and main attraction of the women's journal. As a genre, romance stories are generally traced to much earlier times[3], but it is only in this

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[2] For fears of feminization of literature and the writing profession, see Ann L. Ardis 33-46; Lyn Pykett 5-9, 32-35; Kate Flint 137-86.

[3] Fowler (11-17) traces the romance fiction to early fairy tales and folk tales, and argues that it is with

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era that they reached into a sufficiently diverse and wide readership to make the genre really “popular”. Even circulating libraries which lent books to subscribers for an annual fee and were an extremely influential source in the mid-Victorian era for providing novels to a predominantly female readership (Makinen 24), catered mostly to a middle-class or well-to-do lower middle class readership, and could not compete with the cheap penny price of many of the new mass publications. As such, these latter already demonstrate many of the generic conventions and stylistic, thematic issues of the popular romance genre that are carried onto this day. This is important, as it makes it possible to apply the more recent feminist theories which have generally focused on mid-20th century romance works. It is also significant in highlighting the fact that, while more recent romance stories have occupied most of the critical spotlight, turn-of-the-century mass women’s readings have been a relatively neglected area.

A second finding is that these turn-of-the-century women’s publications all seem to display a great prominence of visual interest, a trait that immediately sets them apart from earlier publications. This visual appeal also explains for their popularity as opposed to the latter’s decline (Sillars 72), and is reflective of a visually oriented urban commercial culture based on leisure consumption and display. Even the romance plots emphasize this atmosphere of fashion and display, going into great details over what to wear for the characters and where to go for the right occasions. The margins of the pages are littered with brightly depicted ads selling the very products that would promote the better feminine self paraded by the fictive heroines, who were finally rewarded with love, thus underlining the slippage between the ideal commodity and the ideal man, both objects of the reader’s fetishistic love. The act of reading these visually stimulating and ad-laden publications is therefore very much like the act of window-shopping, with the journals addressing the readers as consumers and promising them a better feminine make-over with the purchase of the right products.

This leads on to the third characteristic of these publications, their intrinsic affinity to a mass-produced commodity for sale. The publishing industry became increasingly professionalized in the 1890s, with the establishment of the Publishers’ Association, and the domination of the market by a few capital-rich “press barons” like Newnes and Harmsworth, famous for their multiple publications and aggressive marketing (Beethman 123). Once a successful format was found, little variation was made. In the case of *Tit-Bits*, for instance, no significant change is perceived throughout the journal’s publication course, with its sixteen page patchwork of

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the domestic romance of the 1840s and 1850s, which mainly appealed to a middle-class readership, that the early forms of the mass romance began to take shape.

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miscellany variety, including advice, humorous jokes or anecdotes, romantic fiction, advertisement, statistical information, quips and queries, competitions and reader correspondence, occupying the same columns and page layout (Jackson 204-05). When other publishers quickly followed suit, flooding the market with emulations and look-alikes, this does indeed underline the general standardization and uniformity of the mass press, despite a surface of visual variety and stimulation. Such a tendency, later scathingly attacked by the Frankfurt School as the modern culture industry's deceptive trick of parading the "eternal sameness" as the "incessantly new" (Adorno 1997: 44), certainly started to manifest itself in the 1890s.[4] A contemporary critic Agnes Reppelier complained in particular about the formulaic quality of these penny weeklies, citing a "gentle and unobtrusive dullness; a smooth fluency of style, suggestive of the author's having written several hundreds of such stories before, and turning them out with no more intellectual effort than an organ-grinder uses in turning the crank of his organ; an air of absolute unreality about the characters, from their deadly sameness" (221).

With the mass women's publications no different from a mass-produced commodity, it is thus important to treat their reading not as an isolated reading phenomenon, but as an integral part of women's participation in modern urban commodity culture. In many ways, these female periodicals of the 1880s and 1890s grow from a set of circumstances similar to those which gave rise to the department store. The emergence of a mass reading/consuming public coincides with the expansion of the advertising industry and an urban culture emphasizing spectacle and visual display. The act of reading these mass publications is therefore an act of consumption, and should be firmly located at the center of turn-of-the-century urban commercial culture.

The popularity of the women's magazines as a phenomenon is not amply addressed by contemporary literature, suggesting a lamentable and more general neglect of women's experience of urban modernity.[5] Sporadic mention occurs in some literary works that use London as a setting and subject. Katherine Mansfield's 1908 story "The Tiredness of Rosabel", for instance, depicts a young girl reading

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[4] Adorno's critique, though directed toward American mass culture of the 20th century, is applicable here, because many of the new changes besetting the turn-of-the-century British publishing industry, including the populist tone, visual style and presentation, were attributed by contemporary critics to the American influence, particularly to American periodicals like *Harper's*, *Scribner's* and the *Century*, which, though produced in New York, were also available through T. Fisher Unwin in London (Silas 73).

[5] Women's public presence in the modern urban scene is a subject generally neglected by modern literature, including the new woman literature. Janet Wolff sees that as proof of the dominance of men in urban modernity and the impossibility in the modern streets of the flaneuse, or empowering female presence with active observation. Others accuse Wolff of reinforcing unwittingly spatialized gender boundaries, and of negating the enlarged scope for female self-fashioning brought about by women's participation in the modern commodity culture. See Wolff; Parsons 2-8.

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cheap love stories on the London bus and a shopgirl fantasizing about a romance plot she's just read in order to relieve her everyday monotony. Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* describes the shopgirl Mildred as avidly consuming the popular novelettes and magazines and "stimulated" by the readings to develop a voracious sexual and material appetite that eventually leads to her degradation. But George Gissing's London novels, especially *New Grub Street* (1891), give the most detailed treatment to the subject. *New Grub Street*, on writers, journalists and the periodical press, pits the New Journalism, mass produced by a vulgar yet powerful commodity industry, against serious literature, penned by the lonesome and desperate writer genius of integrity. Because women's press looms especially large in the New Journalism, a further gender dimension is added to this conflict, the conflict between a feminized mass force and an elitist masculine individual.

Since the 18th century, Grub Street had traditionally been the home of journalists who wrote purely for mercenary ends with no view to artistic merit ("Introduction"), but these only began to constitute a severe threat to the serious writers by the late 19th century, with the blooming of the mass commercial periodicals.[6] Gissing's novel addresses the situation of writers in this second period, and records the pathetically fading fortunes of writers of integrity in stark contrast with the almost brutal and overpowering rise in prosperity of the New Journalism. Edwin Reardon, in many ways a self-portrait of Gissing himself in his own struggles against poverty and frustration, is a writer of the traditional "three-decker" novel, a form that "has had its day" (*New Grub Street* 42) and is fast becoming obsolete in a market flooded by cheap periodicals of trivia and sensation. Refusing to compromise his principles, and the "last man to have anything to do with journalism" (62), Reardon, along with his writer friend Biffen, eventually die poor and desolate. By contrast, those who succumb to the market or profit by it, like Milvain, the manipulative journalist, or Whelpdale, the failed novelist turned journal writer-cum-editor, are rewarded with success and prosperity. Mr. Whelpdale, turning round a cheap women's magazine *Chat* by changing the name to *Chit-Chat*, "the very thing to catch the multitude" (376), has found a successful formula of short length, variety and trivia. The formula, under which no article in the paper is to measure "more than two inches in length, and every inch must be broken into at least two paragraphs", deserves to be quoted in full:

> I would have the paper address itself to the quarter-educated; that is to say, the great new generation that is being turned out by the Board schools, the young men and women who can just read, but are incapable of sustained attention. People of this kind want something to occupy them in trains and

[6] Andreas Huyssen, for instance, pinpoints the stratification of literature along gender lines to the late 19th century, when "the notion gained ground" that "mass culture is somehow associated with woman while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men" (47).

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> on buses and trams. As a rule they care for no newspapers except the Sunday ones; what they want is the lightest and frothiest of chi-chatty information – bits of stories, bits of description, bits of scandal, bits of jokes, bits of statistics, bits of foolery. Am I not right? Everything must be very short, two inches at the utmost, their attention can't sustain itself beyond two inches. Even chat is too solid for them: they want chit-chat. (376-77)

The name of Whelpdale's journal, and the formula expostulated, certainly serve as a mocking reminder of *Tits-bits*, the most popular penny journal of the time. But the formula is also true of most of the other mass periodicals flooding the market. The women's periodical is no exception. An examination of *Home Chat*, for instance, finds that its lead item, perhaps not coincidentally entitled "Chit-chat", turns out to be "tit-bits" journalism in its purest form. A disparate collection of information and opinion, each item just four or five lines long, is arranged without any apparent connection or any sense of their relative importance. It could include discussion of the latest fashion in hats, cookery, cosmetics, novel-reading, the Bible or cycling as a sport for women, all treated as equally important (Beetham 194). Another journal mentioned by Gissing, *The English Girl,* for which Milvain's sister is writing "little things" (*New Grub Street* 219), could very likely refer to the enormously popular *Girls' Own Paper* (1880-1927), with its regular circulation of 250,000 (Forrester 14). An examination of this journal finds that, though less focus is on the domestic or home-improvement aspects as the audience addressed is a new-found readership of pre-marriage girls, a phenomenon that testifies to the New Journalism's ever more diversified target groups, the overall formula of shortness, variety and trivia holds equally true.

Gissing leaves little doubt as to where his sympathies lie in this bitter and unbalanced struggle between the lone, serious writers and the massive forces of the market. *New Grub Street* is full of condescending and dismissive references to the mass women's journal's vulgarity and shameful lack of standard. Advising his sister that she should write "worthless" "commonplace" (317) for a women's illustrated weekly, and delete the "less obvious reflections" in her article, Milvain details his contempt for the mass market (though such contempt has never prevented him from actively catering to it and profiting thereby). "You must remember", he advises the sister, "that the people who read women's papers are irritated, simply irritated, by anything that isn't glaringly obvious. They hate an unusual thought. The art of writing for such papers – indeed, for the public in general – is to express vulgar thought and feeling in a way that flatters the vulgar thinkers and feelers." (317) In another scene, when his other sister objects to his friend Whelpdale's proposed *Chit-Chat* journal, by

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saying that one must not encourage “these poor, silly people” “in their weakness”, Milvain again comes to the support of Whelpdale by further pouring insult over the intellect of the public. “Fools will be fools to the world’s end. Answer a fool according to his folly; supply a simpleton with the reading he craves, if it will put money in your pocket.” (378) Milvain’s cynicism certainly betrays a “conscious insincerity of workmanship” (41), which Reardon earlier has professed never to sink down to, but his words do highlight his own, as well as the novel’s low opinion of the standard of the “frothy” women’s journal and the mass female reader. Milvain then advises Whelpdale to actively court the sensational, by including in each issue at least “one strongly sensational item”, not even an article, like “What the Queen eats!” or “How Gladstone’s collars are made!” displayed on a placard (378).

These scenes of discussion among the journalists and would-be editor focus on how mass women’s publication is produced or edited/penned from the publisher’s or editor’s point of view. In his other London novels *The Odd Women* and *The Year of Jubilee*, Gissing also details out the situation of the women readers of these mass publications (see later). He thus stands as one of the few novelists to provide a rather complete literary record of both the reading as well as publishing experiences of the mass women’s press, and the choice of his novels poses as the best example to illustrate the interesting phenomenon of turn-of-the-century mass women’s reading. The contents of these readings primarily fall into two categories-- romance installments and the fashion, ads and leisure columns that are linked directly with the commodity culture--both subjects that Gissing rants against and treats as mutually reinforcing. The following analysis thus divides itself into three parts, the first part addressing the relationship between women readers and commodity culture, the second analyzing the women reader’s reading position during the consumption of romance, and the final part locating women’s reading as part of the modern urban culture of visual distraction.

Women’s Press and Commodity Culture

Gissing blames the mass market for the destruction of true literature and the leveling of culture; at the same time he also sees the women readers, “fools” and “simpletons”, as passively duped by the real evil behind mass culture, the business owners. Women’s mass press is particularly seen as colluding with the commodity culture in manipulating as well as financially and morally ruining the women readers. In *The Year of Jubilee*, for instance, Ada’s maid, an avid reader of Ada’s hand-me-down women’s illustrated magazines and victim to her own “imbecile vanity” and “bottomless ignorance”, falls into the “clutches” of the new “pay-by-installment” marketing ploy in order to buy some “trinkets” (221), which

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probably promises her a better self and an instant elevation to her mistress's social level. Unable to keep up the payments and utterly ruined, she resorts to theft and commits suicide when caught in the act. Ada herself, a well-to-do lower middle class housewife, is obsessed with all kinds of mass women's publications, including "illustrated weeklies, journals of society, cheap miscellanies, penny novelettes, and the like." (5) At the end of the week, when new numbers come in, she would "pass many hours upon her sofa, reading installments of a dozen serial stories, paragraphs relating to fashion, sport, the theatre, answers to correspondents (wherein she especially delighted), columns of facetiae, and gossip about notorious people." (5) The novel disapproves sharply of Ada's irresponsible buying binges, "running up bills", while goaded blindly by these dazzling journals, and her subsequent neglect of her household duties as a wife and mother (218, 300) eventually leads to the breakup of her marriage.

That mass women's readings conspire with the commercial interest to induce the desire for commodities and boost consumption is indeed a trend accelerating particularly in the 1890s. An examination of the layout of these publications finds that this decade witnesses an increasingly physical and visual blurring of the journals' text and the many ads they run. Women's periodicals now wooed commercial buyers by promising in the press directories that ads would always face or be blended into the reading matter, and that attention would be lavished on the display of the desirable commodity (Beetham 193). In *Home Chat*, for instance, ads are dispersed through the text and, instead of appearing on the last pages of the journal as was the practice in earlier decades, they now appear on the same page as the reading matter. Since the text itself is now broken into the double column format, with short "two-inch" passages, it is easy to give one passage to ads and one to the text, so that the two are visually indistinguishable and mutually integrated. What looks like a short story might turn into an account of a new commodity that promises a better female self, and an article on fashion might be interspersed with ads for specific brands or shops whose names are recommended in the article. Such blurring of the boundaries points not just to the fusion of editor and adman, but also makes it easier to sell the product and harder for the reader to distance herself from the ads or exercise independent judgments. Promising better results for their advertisers, the mass women's publications, with this new arrangement, have indeed manipulated the female reader to serve the interests of commercial owners.

Even the new "democratic" and chatty tone that characterizes the typical mass journal in the 1890s, the abandoning of the authoritative, instructive voice of mid-Victorian journal writing, may also be simply a marketing ploy to deceive the reader into a false sense of self-importance, so that more profit could be made. Posing

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as the reader's friend, the journal seems to treat the reader as an equal, and better still, actively seeks to flatter and please by addressing her as someone "in the know", someone who does not have the "need" to be instructed but merely lacks the time for tit-bit information or the right product to buy. The famous "Answers to Readers" column and the "Readers' Correspondence" column, for instance, a hugely popular new feature adopted by almost all women's mass periodicals of the 1890s, invariably use a very friendly editorial persona urging the reader to regard it as a "personal friend" (*Forget-Me-Not* 16). One columnist describes the reader-writer relationship as a "mutual aid society" and adopts the position of the errand-runner, introducing products and offering to buy them for the reader to save the latter the trouble to "run wildly from shop to shop" (*Woman's Life* 3). Encouraging the reader "most respectfully" to keep sending in those "pretty letters", the editor apologizes profusely for being unable to "sufficiently thank all of you for the generous support you have accorded" to the journal, which has "enabled the future" of the journal (*ibid*). All these compliments are indeed flattering -- Gissing's Ada, for instance, takes special delight in the reader's correspondence section --, but it is highly likely that this changed editorial approach may simply intend to lead the reader into the illusion that she is now wielding greater power or having a bigger say, whereas all this may just be an instance of the deliberate manipulation to "give'em what they want", to "supply a simpleton with the reading he craves", so as to better facilitate sales.

Gissing's views on the mass press ring close to those of Arnold and other modern critics who watched the phenomenal rise of the mass reader with deep concerns. These concerns, which constitute the so-called British "literary" approach to mass society theory, to be distinguished from the continental "sociological" approach of the Frankfurt School, are to reach their critical apogee in the influential British "culture and civilization" school under the auspices of the Leavises in the 1930s.[7] These two schools, writing from the fundamentally opposed grounds of the bourgeois British intelligentsia and continental Marxist social theory, nevertheless share surprisingly common pronouncements, and establish together, for a long time, the dominant critical opinion on low mass culture as split by a Great Divide from a high art of originality, and on mass cultural products as low-value, standardized commodities whose readers are passively manipulated by the social and economic forces that operate behind . [8] Yet, does this mean that the female reader's reading position,

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[7] Though concerns over the mass culture have long been expressed in the writings of Arnold and Gissing and others, it is generally agreed that Q. D. Leavis's 1932 *Fiction and the Reading Public* is the pioneering academic study of mass culture in Britain. The book's main thrust is that mass culture, with its appeal to herd prejudice and base emotions, has threatened the existence of quality literature and led to a general decline in culture. Also see F. R.Leavis, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*.

[8] The two schools still differ on some points. Adorno (1975) believes that mass culture leads to standardization, represses individual difference, and pacifies the public into a false state of gratification

subject as it is to great restrictions, does not at all deviate from what is prescribed by the publishers/business owners, thus confirming their status as nothing other than the passive dupes? What constitutes these dominant values manipulating the reader or are they monolithic? Adorno, for instance, sees the various forms of mass culture industry as conservative and eventually reinforcing the status quo, but if turn-of-the-century mass women's readings do indeed merely play a reinforcing role, why are there so many objections from conservatives like Gissing?

A closer analysis finds that the journals themselves, at the textual level, impart a message whose prescribed and touted values may not at all times enjoy an unproblematic relationship with the dominant gender values of the time. It is true that a significant focus of the journals is on care of the domestic, addressing the woman reader at least as the future wife and care-taker of the whole family. The implied message that the home, with the right purchase of commodities, is the ultimate measure of true womanliness or ideal femininity, is thus imparted to the reader. Yet at the same time this definition of femininity, intricately linked to models of consumption, presumes or promotes a woman reader familiar with the latest best products and the newest mode, knowledge that is gained outside the home and from the shop-lined streets. The increasing dependence on advertisements since the 1890s and the doubling up of editor and adman mean that journals more and more side with businesses to promote a femininity constructed by buyable commodities and by a possession of streetwise knowledge. Mass journals since the 1890s also emphasized more on pleasure, sensation and gossip (Beetham and Boardman 71), which is often gained from going about the town shopping and visiting theatres and galleries, and less on traditional accomplishments that might be more useful in the domestic area. Such an idea of womanliness paraded by the journals and the commodity culture has, however, clashed with constructions of femininity based on Victorian ideas of the separate spheres, pointing to possible conflicts of interests, at least where women's experience in modern commodity culture is concerned, between capitalist and Victorian patriarchal values. [9]

Gissing's works serve as a poignantly obvious example of this potential clash.

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and a better acceptance of the dominant ideology promulgated by culture industry, thus reinforcing the status-quo and deprives the public of a utopian desire for a better society. The British "literary" approach sees the social order as having been dominated traditionally by a critical and intellectual minority who set the standards for the public to follow. This order is now threatened with the rapid rise of mass culture. Mass culture thus threatens, rather than reinforces, the status quo.

[9] An interesting case in point is provided by a turn-of-the-century public debate over the need or propriety of building female public toilets in London's West End shopping areas. The business owners sided with women to argue for such establishments while traditional conservatives, fearful of disruptions of traditional genderized spatial divisions and of the alleged dangers of sexual corruption such establishments might bring, opposed them. The former more or less won the debate as more toilets for women appeared to serve the needs of female shoppers. See Rappaport 82-85.

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His London novels revolve around the central conflict between female characters fascinated by the glittering streets of commerce and pleasure, and alienated male characters trying desperately to prevent their women from "going public" (Harmon 347) and wrecking traditional domesticity and marriage. In *The Odd Women*, the marriage of Monica, a former shopgirl and avid reader of women's periodicals, breaks down because she defies her husband Widdowson's pleas to stay indoors. The defeated Widdowson cries out – "It's only this cursed London that has come between us" (225) -- , referring bitterly to the glittering commodity culture that sucks in women like a whirlpool. The male characters in *The Year of Jubilee* also feel threatened by the new female public presence. Nancy's father rants passionately against the "most worthless creatures" of the modern "trashy, flashy girls" who "trollop about the streets day and night" and wreck their husbands because they could not get "silks and furs" and the latest new products (40). The end of the novel sees Nancy, a lower-middle-class lady turned shopgirl, removed to suburban domesticity at the insistence of her husband. The choice of the shopgirl is perhaps not coincidental, because shopgirls, with their profession and public visibility, are placed in the center of the commodity culture. Shopgirls also constitute the main reader for the cheap mass women's periodicals (Reppelier 209), the fashion and gossip pages supplementing their already considerable knowledge of the latest trends, and the romance stories offering them solace and sensation to relieve their mundane work. The femininity promoted in these women's publications is thus seen by Gissing's male characters as one that knows "no such thing as a home" (40).

It would be dangerous, of course, to romanticize women's participation in commodity culture through mass readings as, in itself, empowering or disruptive of patriarchal values. A question that needs to be asked here is whether, by promoting a femininity that potentially clashes with patriarchal hierarchies based on traditional domesticity, the mass women's press is also pushing the female reader into new forms of manipulation by capitalists, and whether patriarchal values, by adapting to new forms of commodity culture, have continued to impact on women's enlarged public activities albeit in new manifestations. This latter is particularly important, since the mass women's press has been instrumental in constructing a commodified female body and in coupling women with commodity. Solomon-Godeau has argued that one of the most conspicuous features of modern commodity culture is its sexualization of the commodity, and designation of desirable femininity as a key emblem of the commodity itself. In becoming not only the commodity's emblem but its lure, the feminine image becomes embedded in the structure of commodity fetishism, and is made to reflect and intensify the commodity's lure (113-14).[10] Women's press, in its

[10] Using the example of 19th century French art forms, Solomon-Godeau points out that while

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many ads and fashion pages, sell women's products, but in touting a femininity based on the consumption of commodities, implying an ideal femininity that is purchasable itself, it contributes to the intensifying commodification of the female body. Though women readers are addressed as the consumer of these commodities, the eventual feminine body, assembled with these commodities, cannot ultimately escape the objectifying gender hierarchy newly manifested as the ubiquitous male gaze permeating the public space just opened for women.

Having said that, it still needs to be pointed out that women's participation in modern commodity culture is a very complicated process wherein both restricting and, indeed, emancipating, forces co-exist and interact with each other. An interesting point of illustration would be the ambiguous position of the feminists[11] in turn-of-the-century London. Women's movement activists have viewed women's involvement with mass culture with mixed feelings. On the one hand, many, while advocating for the raising of women's social consciousness and for the cultivation of women as rational, independent and strong beings, disapprove of mass culture's perceived fostering and exploitation of the irrational and sentimental in women. The proto-feminist Rhoda in Gissing's *The Odd Women*, for instance, blames romance-reading as drawing out the "animal"-like side of the female reader (58). In this denouncing of the women consumer/reader as passive and irrational, utterly unable to exercise independent judgments, these feminists, who otherwise wanted women to enter men's public sphere and believed that women could do "equally well" "whatever men could do" (58), strangely side with masculinist conservatives believing home as the only "womanly" place (162). But on the other hand, many other feminists, in their efforts to change a male-oriented cityscape, are combining this purpose with considerable accommodation of and even active participation in the mass commercial culture.

Women's movement activists are among the vanguard forces to establish first women's clubs, then women-managed shops, in London's central shopping area of the West End, at first to accommodate the demands of women newly prominent in the urban commercial space. But such accommodation certainly in its turn encouraged and intensified women's participation in commodity culture. Liberal feminists

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traditionally it had been the idealized and erotically invested male body that had occupied the central place in art theory and pedagogy, it is only in the 19th century "media explosion" of mass produced lithographic imagery that eroticized female bodies eclipsed the male, suggesting a shift in bourgeois ideologies of gender and sexuality. He thus argues for strong links between a visual economy of feminine display and the modern forms of commodity fetishism (113-16).

[11] The word "feminist" is used because it came into popular use in Britain in the 1890s coincident with the period of the greatest expansion of women's clubs. Some scholars have, however, questioned the term since it might be misleading to describe the varied and very diverse nature of the 19th century women's movement. This paper agrees with Beetham and Boardmand (61) that the term can still be usefully employed for women's movements at that time which provided a critique of contemporary culture, especially women's position in it.

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involved with the Langham Place Circle opened the first female clubs in the 1880s to provide public "resting places for women wayfarers" including women shoppers, sightseers and workers. By 1912, an article claimed that "nearly every woman nowadays" "had a club" and that "the idea that a woman should, because of her womanhood, remain solely in the domestic circle … is a thing of the past." (qtd. in Rappaport 74) Clubs increasingly became commercial ventures, offering food and drink and products for sale to women, in an ambience of the latest fashion deco that rivaled the best shops. Feminists also launched themselves into the opening of female restaurants, teashops and clothes stores; many, like the famous "Dorothy" restaurant opened by a Girton College graduate in 1888, were located in New Bond Street, heart of the West End (Rappaport 102). Even Rhoda in Gissing's *The Odd Women*, together with her friend Mary Barfoot runs a club-like women's vocational school on West End's Great Portland Street, to teach women practical skills for what used to be men's professions, and to even provide loans for women to open bookshops and pharmacies (54). Like the real-life Association for the Promotion of Female Employment established by the Langham Place feminists, which Rhoda's school is very likely based on (Grylis 166), such feminist enterprises train women to be "defiant" and "militant" (136) through the regular political speeches, but also prepare women to participate in commodity culture. Rhoda's school is already making enough profit to allow for a possible expansion; other more commercial institutions like women's clubs and restaurants definitely prospered, enough to prompt a male club-patron to ask in 1904, in view of women's increasingly take-over of the West End, "what would the women conquer next?" (qtd. in Rappaport 100)

Women's movement activists also enthusiastically joined in the mass female press, publishing and editing quite a few feminist journals, which, in turn, reflect a similar accommodation of rather than confrontation between feminist and commercial interests. Though starting with a premise to raise women's social consciousness and to promote more political action, these journals, especially since the 1890s, become increasingly indistinguishable (except in their more somber editorials) from the other mass women's periodicals, with their lavish visual display and inclusion of elements like tit-bit fashion and ad pages, correspondence columns and the inevitable romance installments (Beetham and Boardman 61). An examination of the penny-priced *The Woman Worker*, finds that despite its militant editorial declaring its purpose to "teach unity, help improve working conditions, present a monthly picture of the many activities of women Trade Unionists … [effect] improvement in social and industrial position of women … stimulating the spirit of organized resistance to capitalist wrong … teaching the need for collective action" (1), its format and visual layout find little to differ from the average cheap women's magazines. Illustrated ads for pills to

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give strength, lasting polish, sanitary towels, cheap cloth material and milk products litter the pages, and health and beauty tips and home hints and recipes via for space in the trivia columns with the occasional short feminist notices like "women should vote!" printed in bold characters. The two romance serials, entitled "Put to the Proof" and "Partners: The Story of a Man and a Woman", suggesting the general run-of-the-mill romance stuff of trials and rewards in love, though obviously of a simpler and coarser kind as judged by the rather unsophisticated titles, take up one and a half page each, and appear side by side with short minutes of the National Federation of Women Workers. This example serves to show not just feminists' possible implication in the development of modern commodity culture, but also that, in encouraging women's participation in consumerism, feminists probably view that participation as somehow aiding women's cause for equality.

It is clear that the accelerated mass commodity culture since the 1890s does enlarge for women the accepted scope of public activities like shopping, walking and working. Shopping areas like London's glittering West End are among the first public spaces where respectable women were accepted to go around unchaperoned, encouraged and catered to by the women's clubs and restaurants. Day trips by unaccompanied women to London or the bigger provincial shopping centers were increasingly becoming the vogue (Walker 77-79), while lower-middle-class women found jobs like shopgirls, clerks and typists in the main business and leisure centers. With women the key buyer in most households, catered to and wooed by sellers big and small, women's mass press assists the women readers with their knowledge of the latest products as well as of the shops and streets and of cityscape. It is true that such help purports at least partially to further the interests of businesses, but the knowledge thus imparted is not entirely without the empowering potential. Many tips offered by the publications are practical, and women readers are increasingly equipped with the knowledge to tell a relatively "good" product from the "garbage" produced to merely deceive and cheat.

A shopping entry from *Woman's Life: An Illustrated Weekly for the Home*, for instance, frankly admits "how tantalizing mere catalogues are", and how "shops only describe what they want to sell", but goes on to advise where best to find "what we women want to buy" "from our point of view" (3), pointedly underlining the fact that the women's press does not always side or conspire with the business owners. Gissing in his work rants against the exploitative and deceptive manipulation of business-owners before which the women consumers have no power of resistance nor ability for active observation (*In the Year of Jubilee* 281), but the mass women's press does often help foster a keener discerning power and a habit of rational and controlled consumption that targets exactly against the kind of deceptive exploitation that

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Gissing complains of. Thus the reading of such mass women's publications helps build an accumulation of knowledge that is not entirely without a positive potential.

Since such reading is not an isolated phenomenon but an integral part of women's participation in the modern urban commodity culture, the knowledge thus gained also crucially facilitates women's familiarity with the urban landscape and eventually their reading of and impact on a previously male-oriented cityscape. Women's magazines are full of shopping narratives like "A Day's Shopping", "Sketches from Oxford Street" or "Round the West-End Shops" (*Woman's Life*), where the narrator presents herself as a *flâneuse* that takes the women reader on a virtual tour of goods, shops, streets and neighborhoods. These narratives, professedly to induce more consumption (and possibly sponsored by shops), also organize the cityscape as the female reader participates in a semiotic journey in which she essentially reads the metropolis, navigates the urban scene and makes sense of and masters the cityscape. Even though this semiotic journey is not independently undertaken but largely guided, probably by business interests, the prospects are still there for her to attempt a transformation from a reader of journal texts or consumer of products into a reader of urban text, a navigator and urban explorer that is at least partially conducive to the construction of a feminine self based on wider and more knowledgeable participation in the public urban space.

Women's Press and the Romance Story

Gissing's work sees women's romance-reading as part of the mass commodity culture that draws women away from domesticity onto the glittering and deceptive streets of "business and pleasure" (*In the Year of Jubilee* 12). While the fashion and ads sections of the mass periodicals stimulate women's desire for commodities which the glittering shops promise to satisfy, the romance-installment sections, by wallowing in sentimentality and sensuality, arouse women's desires for sexual transgression for which, again, her new access to the public streets of commerce seems to offer a thrilling venue. Thus in *The Odd Women*, Miss Royston runs away with a married man because "her nature was corrupted with sentimentality", from devoting "[a]ll her spare time" to romance reading (58). Women would be better "reform[ed]", and saved from moral, intellectual and emotional corruption if all these romance writers are "strangled" and "thrown into the sea". The mass female reader, who could not understand the "vice" of romance stories, is so passively manipulated that when she commits the act of moral degradation, "ten to one she had in mind some idiot heroine of a book" (58). Monica herself gets weary of her husband and more restless of her static home-bound married life, after the perusal of many a "love-story" "embittered her lot to the last point of endurance". Romance-reading gives her a "suggestion" of

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the ideal lover (202), which she more than finds a suggestion of later in actual life in the person of the lover that she comes to know in her many outings. A similar cautionary tale against the morally corrupt influence of romance reading is provided in Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, where the shopgirl Mildred's seduction by a married man is at least partly attributed to her avid reading of "penny romance novelettes", which she thinks are so "refined" and "genteel" (425), but are really the "same thing over and over again" with the "names" "changed" and "that's all" (391).

That the mass female reader is especially passive and at risk from the pernicious manipulation of the romance stories is collaborated by other contemporary writings which argue for the much more dangerous effects of romance reading on the mass female reader, than of the "penny dreadfuls"-- cheap stories of murder or adventure, on their main reader, the "quarter-educated" men. Women's reading is seen to be of more "subtle", "invidious" and long-term effect because of its impact in the domestic sphere. Working-class girls might, by indulging in stories of a poor maid discovering her noble birth and rewarded in love and wealth, learn "high-flown conceits and pretensions", dislike manual work, and "hand down" these ideas to their children (Salmon 523). Medical opinions of the period also see a host of female maladies and "disturbed nerves" as arising from the "great evil of romance reading". The romance's focus on sentimentality and sensuality, the description of love scenes, of "thrilling, romantic episodes", "find an echo in the girl's physical system and tend to create an abnormal excitement of her organs of sex." (Wood-Allen 124) Thus stimulated, it is but a matter of time before the impure thoughts translate into improper action, leading to the ruins of a Miss Royston or Mildred.

The implied charge that these views betray is that romance-reading for women risks the disruption of established moral, sexual and class order, that it offers escapist fantasies and irrational distractions, and that it grips the passive mass female reader completely in its clutches. These judgments have for years impacted heavily on the reception of the popular romance. Feminist response to the genre, which only reached its popular status with the mushrooming of mass women's periodicals in the 1890s, has also been negative from the very start. Gissing's denunciation in *The Odd Women* of the harmful effects of romance-reading on Miss Roydon, for instance, is uttered through Rhoda, the proto-feminist, who is hostile to romance's cultivation of the irrational, sentimental and the "animal" in women (58). In real life, Helen Bosanquet, eminent feminist social-worker, disapproved in 1901 that the cheap women's periodicals, by allowing the "shop-girl" to "soar with a heroine (in whom she finds a glorified self) into a heaven of luxury and sentimentality" so at to "soothe away the irritation of the long day's toil", implanted in the female reader the wrong notion that the "whole point and interest of a woman's life is contained in the few months

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occupied by her love story" (680). Such ideas that the escapist pleasure of romance reading blinds women to their reality and instills in them the centrality of heterosexual love, are carried on in feminist critiques in the nineteen sixties and seventies, wherein the popular romance genre, whose enormous popularity has continued unabated, was vigorously attacked for binding women to an unnatural dependency on men, and to "cherishing the chains of their bondage" (Firestone 180). Feminists may see different things from masculinist conservatives when one disapproves of the genre's complicity with patriarchal values while the other complains of its moral and sexual disruption, but in concurring with the latter on the female reader's passive subjection to manipulation, her irrationality and lack of mental judgment, these feminists have unwittingly reinforced patriarchal gender hierarchies.

Feminist critics since the 1980s have begun to adopt a different strategy. Some (Modleski) have come to emphasize the gaps and contradictions behind the textual message of the genre, pointing out the underlying frustrations female characters often nurture against men and the patriarchal system. Others, reflecting the increasing attention in cultural studies on the using/consuming process of the publications (rather than just on the meaning producing/constructing process)[12], and on cases wherein the dominant values have failed to interpellate the individual (Turner 199), thus departing from previous scholarship that emphasized the passivity of manipulated readers, have stressed the discrepancy between women's actual usage of these readings and the passive "ideal" reading position prescribed by the text's preferred meaning. The popular romance, instead of the Adornoean culture industry unfailingly churning out sugar-coated versions of the dominant ideology, is a site both deeply saturated with the dominant values and also where negotiation and resistance are constantly acted out.

Janice Radway is a key representative of this new trend to perceive women's reading of popular romance as a historicized act located at the level of her everyday life and activities. Radway points out that the escapist fantasy the female reader experiences in her romance-reading, attacked by earlier feminists as the sugar-coated narcotic doled out by patriarchal hierarchy, functions indeed to offer temporary comfort and as a means of venting frustrations, so as to facilitate the reader's eventual return to and acceptance of the reality of patriarchal domination. Yet Radway also argues for a completely different socio-cultural value for such a reading experience,

[12] Two main influences are usually ascribed to for this important shift in the critical focus in studies of popular culture. Barthes' ideas on the death of the author and on readerly pleasure valorize the importance of reader's response regardless of textual intentions, while Gramsci's idea of hegemony as a permanent process of negotiation facilitates the realization that popular culture, hitherto seen as a venue for the seamless top-down imposition of dominant values, is also a site where constant negotiation and even bottom-up resistance is possible. The position of the popular reader, instead of one of complete passivity, may also harbor potentials of active judgment and even resistance. See Turner 193-207.

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when the female reader could treat it as their "own" time, "a gift to themselves", with entirely their own pleasure in mind and without the need to play, if only temporarily, the nurturing and caring role imposed on them by the patriarchal system (91). This may not be a conscious rebellion by itself, but in insisting on enjoying "my own time", their reading act, located in the everyday context of her normal daily duties, does in some sense deviate from the endless daily requirements that women are subject to (92). Thus the romance text may attempt to achieve an unproblematic return, after due relief, to patriarchal reality, but the female reader's actual use of this escapist reading contains possibilities of disruption that depart from the prescribed position.

Such an opinion obviously treats the mass female reader as a subject with the ability to understand and even partially control their own behavior, even though such behavior and self-comprehension are limited and are themselves subject to the control of social structures that the subject finds herself in. In Gissing's *The Odd Women*, Monica exchanges the exhaustion and tedium of her shopgirl life for the security of marriage life, only to find that she has merely moved from the slavery of shop labor to another form of bondage. The Victorian ideal of the wife's role in marriage, prescribed for in nineteenth century manuals on women's domestic duties (Sanders 208) and obsessively insisted on by Monica's husband Widdowson, is that the wife treat domesticity as her work and duty, and that she defers to her husband's opinions on her movements, friendships, and the choice of her reading matters. Such demands of work and duty stultify Monica, and she insists on the need for leisure and for free time, which she fills with reading "yellow-backed" (*The Odd Women* 164) romances that "amuse" her and bring her "pleasure" (163). It is in her resistance to her prescribed role to do her work and duty, her protests that a woman should not be "overburdened" or should not "*make* work", that she should have leisure and "enjoyment" of life "as full as possible" (163), that Monica's romance reading becomes a gesture of resistance. It is true that the romance stories she reads may present marriage as the ultimate destiny for women and prescribe for the same feminine virtues of domesticity and submissiveness. It is also true that Monica's romance reading may just be a repetitive act of addiction cultivated intentionally by the culture industry and profit-oriented publishers, through the use of clever ploys like the never-ending installment system which hooks on the reader and induces more desires. Yet at the same her reading is never an isolated activity, nor is her actual use of the text an entire replication of the prescribed position. Located in the specific everyday context of her married life, when she is always pressed upon to do her duty and work, Monica's use of her reading does indeed take on the "combative" color that Radway claims in her landmark research (7), and does indeed embody the positive potential of being transformed into a means of constructing a more independent,

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self-oriented feminine identity. The linear power of gender politics which permeate both the romance texts as well as the social context that Monica finds herself in is indeed powerfully objectifying, but one should not entirely ignore the horizontal dimension of Monica's actual use of the reading, or the interweaving of her reading into her everyday activity which is really where the meaning of her reading is to be located.

A further aspect of the female reader's use of romance reading is that the "trivial", gossipy and seemingly never-ending nature of the serialized romance installments in turn-of-the-century mass women's periodicals, though another effective ploy to flatter and hook on the female reader as has been pointed out above, may also still allow the reader to use romance reading as a means of establishing a shared subject of gossip and conversation, and thus a shared sense of community and of mutual support. The many letters published in the correspondence columns of the 1890s mass journals, a number of which are responses to and discussions of the journals' serialized romance stories, still provide a venue of mutual listening and support and networking for the female reader, a collective forum of encouragement for the female voice which might not have dared to speak alone.

Distraction and Reading

Radway's research has enabled us to treat romance reading not as an isolated and fragmented act but as an everyday activity that derives its meaning from its incorporation in the reader's specific historical and social positioning and context. A final point that needs to be pointed out concerning the turn-of-the-century mass female reader is her immersion in a culture of visual variety and distraction, reflected both in her reading matter and in her surrounding urban context.

This paper has established earlier that the mass publications of the 1890s have been marked by an unprecedented degree of miscellany, trivia and visual stimulation that is unseen in previous journals. This is, to a large extent, attributable to the rise of a visually-oriented mass urban culture at the late years of the 19th century. Since the lower-middle-class and working-class masses constitute the bulk of the readership for the mass publications of the 1890s (Wright 282), a large part of these publications are now consumed during short daily railway or bus rides to and from work, typically by "clerks and artisans, shopgilrs, dressmakers, and milliners" (Repplier 210). The rise of public transport like buses and suburban trains as means of connecting home to work, wherein the mass public grab a few minutes of reading whilst on board, to "beguile the short journey" and the "few spare minutes of a busy day" (ibid), has contributed enormously to the popularity of these mass readings but has also necessitated the prevalence of the "two-inch" miscellany format. Condescendingly

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lumped by critics as variations of the "railway literature", these mass serial publications were seen as "redolent of the manufactory and the shop", full of "articles of an ephemeral interest and of the character of goods made to order", enticing the "hurried passenger" with "violent stimulants" and "something hot and strong", promising "temporary excitement to relieve the dullness of the journey" while cultivating a "perverted and vitiated taste" for the extravagant and sensational (Mansel 1863: 483). The form, style and content of these mass readings point to their close incorporation in mechanized forms of industrialization, wherein, as Benjamin writes of a later mass cultural form – the film, the rhythms of reception is the "rhythm of production on a conveyor belt" (Work of Art 240). That the women's mass publications are intricately linked to the urban commodity culture, in particular to that culture's quintessential spatial icon -- the department store, is further confirmed when a contemporary writer claimed that the magazines were to literature "what a *magasin des modes* is to dress, giving us the latest fashion and little more" (31).

The rise of the mass women's publications is thus an integral part of this new urban experience where visual stimulation, rapidly succeeding scenes and commodities and the influence of mechanization have brought about a fundamental change in cultural and perceptual experiences. Benjamin, writing in his famous article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in 1936, crystallizes this new experience as reception in distraction.[13] The rapid succession of moving images in films, which interrupts any attempts by the audience to stop and reflect and leaves the latter in a perpetual state of heightened stimulation or shock, is an experience of distraction increasingly noticeable in all areas of mass art, and is also a quintessential experience of the violent impact, tactility and visual dynamics of urban modernity. This idea of distraction is attributed to Siegfried Kracauer's study of the 1920s Berlin moving-picture palaces, where he points out that the "stimulation of the senses succeeds one another with such rapidity that there is no room left between them for even the slightest contemplation" (1987: 94). Kracauer's main departure from traditional dismissals of distraction as negative and superficial is that he notices the positive potential residing in this new mode of distraction which characterizes the relationship between modern mass culture and the popular audience. The "fragmented sequence of splendid sense impression" of the picture shows conveys a momentary sense of the disorder of society by exposing to the audience, instead of hiding, its own fragmented reality. Such distraction would thus have a "moral significance" (1987: 94).

Benjamin inherits and elaborates on Kracauer's positive approach to distraction. Distraction, symptomatic of "profound changes in all apperception" (1968: 240), is

[13] For a discussion of the relevant German writings on distraction, see Allen, Eiland, Hake.

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intimately tied to the historical transformation of sense perception brought about by urban, mechanized, industrialized existence, where individuals learn to parry the shock factor of day to day existence while unreflectingly making sense out of a whole array of visual data. Distraction thus involves a mastery of certain skills and a covert ability to perform new tasks of apperception, though in an unreflecting, habitual way born out of long acquaintance. To Benjamin, distraction is no longer seen as mindless inattention or stupefaction, but importantly as collective mastery, as tactile appropriation, and also as entertainment and pleasure, wherein harbors the possibility of sober recognition and of breaking up petrified social conditions.

It is Benjamin's ideas of the ontologically as well as epistemologically changed nature of modern cultural experience which the concept of distraction straddles over, that is of particular significance to our study of turn-of-the-century mass women's publications. Though photography and film, modern cultural forms that occupy Benjamin's attention, did not gain popularity until the 1920s, already there was an accelerated trend of technologization of life and things in the 1890s. Benjamin writes about the concept of distraction as proceeding from the social space of the modern city, and indeed the rapidly changing scenes and traffic, the accelerated pace of life, the press of commodities and their programmed obsolescence are all trends seen in the 1890s. If the film of the 1920s acts as what Sabine Hake terms the "melting pot" for an alienated but fashionable city audience and a sensory "training ground" (152), then in the 1890s, it is the mass journals that played that role, a role that exercises modern readers' ability in the appropriation and appreciation of modernity. This also seems to be confirmed by Kracauer himself, when he attributes the increasing visualization, the "increasing amount of illustrations in the daily press and in periodical publications" to the same worship of distraction and display of pure externality, by the movies (1987: 94). Benjamin's concept of distraction has to be seen in reference to a social body and socially conceived modes of entertainment, in contrast to the traditional bourgeois aesthetic experience of immersion and concentration by a private, individual bourgeois subject toward an auratic work of art. The reading experience of the 1890s mass publications has also a decidedly collective dimension that sets it apart from the basically private nature of traditional novel-reading. Though the actual reading act may be enjoyed alone, as is seen in Gissing's Ada or Monica, the popular correspondence columns and the many letters to editors and advice to other readers attentively carried by all women's magazines, for instance, testify to the increasingly collective nature of journal-reading, and to the journals' role as a site fostering a collective sense of female community. As lower-middle-class and working-class girls, mostly busy shopgirls and female clerks, increasingly constitute the majority of the readership in the 1890s, more and more are

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such journals read in bus rides amid other daily urban activities. This also increases the sense of collective support whereas the reader, already buoyed by the sense of sisterly community and interaction conveyed by the magazines' correspondence columns, literally immerses herself in the thronging, cosmopolitan ambience of the cityscape.

Like film, composed as it were of fragmentary and rapidly succeeding images, the mass journals of the 1890s are characterized increasingly by fragmentation as "two-inch" articles, one-page romance serializations, miscellaneous themes and the ubiquitous picture ads are thrown together to form a heterogeneous hodge-podge. Kracauer's 1920s Berlin picture-shows may still disappoint him, despite their disclosure of disintegration and fragmentation, by eventually attempting a false show of unity (1987: 95), yet the 1890s mass women's publications, with their many sliced-up serializations, their never-ending on-going nature, their "bits of stories, bits of descriptions, bits of scandal, bits of jokes, bits of statistics, bits of foolery" that Gissing so mockingly dismisses in *New Grub Street* (376), seem the very picture of fragmentation that thwarts any attempt at closure or unity. Gissing lambastes the "great new generation" of popular readers as "incapable of sustained attention" "beyond two inches" (376), but a fundamental departure from the traditional aesthetic experience of concentration and sustained contemplation has obviously already occurred in the 1890s. This is the new collective cultural reception in distraction found in all mass forms of culture, among them the mass journals. As the popular women readers flip through the pages of the mass publications, familiarly, stimulated, yet also somehow absent-mindedly, where text and ads mingle and mix and the dazzling visual images interact and succeed each other to create a slide-like effect, their mode of reception is a mode of distraction, similar in nature to filmic distraction.

It would be naïve, of course, to conceive of such distraction by the mass women readers as all empowering or emancipating, especially where textual manipulation is concerned. Adorno, for instance, argues that distraction does not involve any technical expertise or any genuine enjoyment or pleasure but simply the demise of the subject's critical ability, wherein the subject masochistically desires his or her own manipulation and succumbs to the mind-numbing mechanization and atrophied sensibilities of the modern city (1974: 235-38; 1980: 123). Both Adorno and Benjamin agree on the modernity's ontological changes in aesthetic perception, whereby the technological and the apparatus have invaded the human and the natural, subjecting the "human sensorium to a complex kind of training" (1968: 175). Where the two depart is their evaluation of the sociological consequences, when Benjamin, to put it rather simplistically, sees distraction as an emancipatory form of collective experience while Adorno laments a collective stupefaction manipulated by corporate

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capitalism. Of course the importance of Adorno's ideas is not to be ignored. The blurring of text and ads in the women's magazines that this paper addressed earlier, their standardization of format and ideas, for instance, all do point to forces that act against the active exercise of reader's critical capacity, and against individuality and qualitative differences. The objectifying and manipulative forces that operate on the reading process of the mass women's publications are indeed great, but it would risk totalization if distraction is only seen as manipulation by an undifferentiated mass culture to a dazed mass public. Implied in Adorno's arguments is the belief that an authentic aesthetic experience of esoteric, individual concentration in the traditional sense is still possible. Adorno may acknowledge the ontologically changed nature of the modern mass cultural forms, but that change, reflected also in the experience of modernity itself, in the technologization and commodification of things and in a crisis of the traditional metaphysics of meaning, requires new forms of aesthetics that the traditional concepts of artistic autonomy, of closure and integration, probably no longer adequately address.

Benjamin's idea of distraction, without romanticizing or overstating its optimistic evaluation, may be more fruitfully utilized to address the new change. In fact Benjamin is not unaware that distraction could give rise to Adornoean complacent self-surrender and oblivion, especially in his passages on commodity fetishism in *The Arcades Project*. The person who enters the world exhibitions is elevated "to the level of the commodity", and knowingly absorbed in and carried along by the cult of the commodity, "surrenders to its manipulation while enjoying his own alienation from himself and others" (1999: 50-51). Yet here in *The Arcades Project*, the more positive dimension of distraction that is set out in the "Work of Art" essay is also mingled and mixed with distraction as mere diversion, giving rise to a concept that seems to blur and transcend the duality of positive and negative distractions. Howard Eiland calls this ambivalent simultaneity of positive and negative valorizations of distraction a "defining feature of *The Arcades Project*" (62). It is this sense of distraction that our study of the mass women's publications is also going to utilize.

The fragmentation, miscellany, visual dazzle and blurring of text and ads seen in the 1890s mass women's publications do indeed seduce the female reader to involuntary surrender and oblivious intoxication. But it would be a mistake to claim a simple opposition between concentration and distraction or to argue that the concept of distraction does not at all encompass a dimension of positive mastery and pleasure. Nor would it be right to use taste as the dividing line and to argue that the elitist intellectual is immune to involuntary distraction. Baudelaire, for instance, "succumbs" to the intoxicating experience of urban modernity, too (Benjamin 1999:11). And Gissing's *New Grub Street* acknowledges that even clever people "really can't fix

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one's attention in traveling" and would find "even an article in newspaper" "too long" (377), thus implying that the short attention span so scathingly mocked at earlier in the novel is probably caused not just by taste or education, but also by the context of the reading. Distraction is thus a collective experience that happens to all people immersed in the new mass culture. The content of the women's mass reading may be steeped in manipulation, but the meaning of their reading process, of their use of the reading, cannot be divorced from its condition of reception, from their daily context of reading, and the nature of this reading as part of their immersion in cityscape and in rapidly changing urban scenes.

It is the concept of distraction not simply as inattention, but also as attention paid elsewhere, that is particularly useful here. In the "Work of Art" essay, distraction is seen as a habitual repetition of something often in the process of doing something else (Benjamin 1968: 242). While a competent performance of something without thinking about it implies certain mastery of skills, distraction also involves attention paid elsewhere, as one is distracted by something which fleetingly catches the eye, something readily recognizable but glimpsed in a new light. It is this combination of the familiar and the new that characterizes the reading mode of the mass women readers, who as new entrants into the modern urban scene, really use their mass reading as a crucial part of their reading and knowledge of the urban cityscape. The reading of the mass publications, often consumed during bus or train rides (*New Grub Street* 376) while the women readers are physically immersed in an urban landscape of commercialized spectacle, lead to a greater slippage between the literary text and the urban text. The distracted and fragmentary nature of their mass readings which often address them as shoppers, blends them into a greater urban experience that, though subjecting them to the additional forces of commercial manipulation, also contributes to their new insight into and knowledge of the urban landscape. Certainly here their experience is no longer simply distraction as oblivion and inability to get knowledge. Reading as part of their daily life activities, of going around in buses and trains, thus has to blend in with these activities and gains meanings from there.

A final point worth mentioning is the hidden gender dimension behind the concept of distraction. For a concept attributed to the filmic experience of the 1920s, when a large part of such filmic audiences was distinctly female, the links between distraction and a specifically feminine way of reception seem to need more detailed exposure. Benjamin does not mention the linkage, but the term's often negative connotations actually evade the urgent social issues behind, particularly the expansion of social and political freedom for women and the identification of the feminine as a threat to the male bourgeoisie, represented in Gissing, for instance, in the opposition between a masculine, individual and auratic way of reading and a feminine (by

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women or by a feminized, non-intellectual way of reading), mass and distracted way of cultural experience. Even Kracauer, in a less often quoted essay than "Cult of Distraction", reveals the underlying sexism behind the concept. In "The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies", Kracauer dismisses tiller-girls, typists and shopgirls as devoid in judgment and giving themselves over to the "daydream" of films (292). Here the utopian and radical possibilities of distraction as envisaged in his "Cult of Distraction" essay are given over to rather elitist disdain for the mass female audience whose tasteless, oblivious surrender is seen as responsible for the embarrassingly low standard of film production. Kracauer does acknowledge the new predominance of women among film spectators, but in envisaging a positive perception of distraction as the new mode of film reception, he obviously does not have the "little shopgirls" in mind.[14]

Yet if distraction in all its many nuances is to characterize the new collective mode of cultural experience, as both Kracauer and Benjamin argue, then it would be self-defeating to exclude women who constitute a large consumer of such forms of mass culture. In fact the "tactile appropriation" seen by Benjamin as a key trait of distraction applies to what is traditionally viewed as a specifically feminine way of reception, as the visual is seen to appeal to the senses, without going to the mind, and as women are usually seen as particularly prone to and good at such visual/sensual functions. Distraction is thus linked inextricably to a feminine or feminized mode of perception which also characterizes the new mass mode of modern cultural experience. A discussion of distraction must therefore demonstrate awareness of the hidden though very significant feminine associations behind. It must also acknowledge that the positive potential of distraction as set out by Benjamin and Kracauer, just as equally applies to the reception mode of the mass female audience. The mass female reader, shopgirls and all, of the turn-of-the-century women's publications, is no exception.

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[14] For more on Kracauer's early writings on film, see Hake 155-63.