

### Comptes rendus de livres

Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*

Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America*

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Hollows, Joanne. *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000. 229 pp., paper, £9.99, ISBN 0 7190 4395 6.

Clarke, Alison J. *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999. 234 pp., illus., cloth, US\$24.95, ISBN 1 56098 827 4.

#### On Femininity, Consumerism, and Popular Culture

My mother, who was married in the mid 1950s and lived during the rest of that decade in Montreal's Park Extension district, and whose career has always been to care for her family and her home, saw the Tupperware party as a mixed blessing. It was a chance for an evening out with her similarly-employed friends while my father minded me; there was an aura of excitement associated with the event and she could get dressed up; and there were all kinds of attractive new products to examine and buy. On the other hand, she remembers feeling obliged to make a purchase, and perhaps there was even a bit of rivalry amongst her peers as to who would buy what and how much.

Were these Tupperware parties modes of oppression, exploitations of women who were shamed into consumerist behavior they couldn't afford, imposing acts which over-wrote their own design preferences while prioritizing (masculine) modernist aesthetics? Or were these occasions opportunities for empowerment, which valorized homemaking as the responsible, essential exercise of efficiency and frugality; made casual entertainment acceptable and hence facilitated

household chores; and created opportunities for women — including minorities and those considered too old for general employment — to develop lucrative, self-fulfilling careers?

Two recent books provide engaging opportunities to reconsider the roles and perceptions of women, Tupperware, and popular material culture writ large, from post-Second World War to the end of the twentieth century. Alison Clarke is a tutor in design history and material culture at London's Royal College of Art and a visiting professor of design history and theory at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria. Her book-length study of Tupperware takes in and substantially expands on articles of hers that have appeared in *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field*, edited by Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison (Winterthur: Winterthur Museum, 1997), and *Visions of Suburbia*, edited by Roger Silverstone (London: Routledge, 1997). Joanne Hollows is Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom, and she previously co-edited two books on film studies. Indeed, there has been a recent proliferation of books that address women and material culture from a number of perspectives, including Joy Parr's *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (University of Toronto Press, 1999); Mary Drake McFeely's *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie? American Women and the Kitchen in the Twentieth Century* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); and Sherrie A. Inness, *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture* (University of Iowa Press, 2001).

Joanne Hollows' *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* serves as an excellent point of departure, not only to consider her target subjects — film, romantic fiction, television soap

operas, fashion and beauty practices, and youth culture and popular music, spanning from the 1960s to the 1990s — but Clarke's Tupperware analysis as well. Hollows begins with an examination and reconsideration, in the light of recent feminist studies, of so-called second-wave feminist critique of the 1960s and 1970s. During that period of intense social activism, feminist writing cast a critical eye on the evils of femininity as a principal mode of suppressing women's initiative and self worth.

In particular, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* points to American suburbia of the 1950s as catastrophic in the history of women's activism. The book asserts that women's decisions to succumb, at this time, to the ideals espoused in femininity, to prioritize their identity as wives and mothers and home-makers as promoted vigorously in women's magazines and advertising, put women in the same category as Nazi concentration camp victims. In this spectacularly disproportionate analogy, Friedan emphasizes just how much women were dehumanized, were taught to be passive and child-like, and were ultimately recast as subservient to their masters and incapable of justifying their own place in the world. To regain ground in the light of such weakness, women were encouraged by Friedan to champion traits associated with masculinity, such as the pursuit of higher learning and the development of a career outside the home.

Hollows acknowledges that Friedan's work as well as that of other second-wave feminists have already been subjected to rigorous criticism by researchers, and sums up these reservations; it is here that Hollows' own contribution finds its roots. She reiterates that Friedan homogenizes the character and experience of women in 1950s America, and overlooks the profoundly different perspectives determined by class, race and geography, perspectives which also change over time. Second, Friedan assumes a passivity and a consistency in women's responses to the hegemonic power of the media in propagating the feminine mystique, whereas research in media and cultural studies demonstrates how readings of these "polysemic" messages (capable of generating multiple meanings) varied substantially as a function of the social and cultural groups to which the readers belonged. Third, Hollows is invigorated by the fact that opposition between femininity and feminism has been revisited and reworked or resisted by post second-wave feminist and cultural-studies writers.

Hollows' own stance is further stimulated by configuring her own research to accommodate

recent work in the overlapping fields of feminism, popular culture, and cultural studies. For example, she sees contemporary feminist interventions into the realm of popular culture as creating a space for supporting femininity as an area of study, since "work within feminist cultural studies," for example, "has challenged the idea that the 'feminine' is inherently worthless, trivial, and politically conservative." Her objective, hence, is to demonstrate the following points: that "what it means to be a woman" is subject to "transformation, contestation, and change;" that "there is no single feminine identity but multiple feminine identities" and they have been diversely "classified, evaluated and ranked;" and that some feminist cultural criticism still castigates femininity, to the extent that "a feminist vanguard" continues to want to "teach 'ordinary women' the error of their ways." In short, feminist cultural criticism has to be understood in terms of its "relation to the ways in which different feminine identities (including feminist identities) are bound up with different power relations in different historical contexts."

Rather than making direct studies of the variety of subjects that she chooses to take on, in this book Hollows' strategy is to report on the recent historiography associated with each, as a litmus test in her consideration of productive feminist critique. What we have, then, is an evaluation of previous evaluations, rather than a primary-source study of artifacts themselves. Indeed, one cannot help being slightly disappointed by this, especially in light of the title, and the promise of the illustration on the cover. It is an image taken from the 1974 film *The Stepford Wives*, showing eight of them, in a bountiful supermarket, tantalizingly attired in an allure of décolleté primly countered by wide-brimmed, socially-sanctioned hats, with laden, numbered shopping carts serving as props on which white-gloved hands are demurely crossed. In other words, whereas Hollows' intentions are laudable, her ambitions in this book justified and welcomed, her own careful analysis of material culture would perhaps have served as an even more desirable and instructional model in the promotion of the ideals which she identifies.

While each section of the book is, at least indirectly, a study of material culture, some are more relevant than others as a demonstration of the ability of physical artifacts to stand as the basis of feminist exploration of cultural values and ideals. The chapter on fashion and beauty practices is a pivotal example of how material culture can form the basis of an emphatically revealing

feminist discourse. Beginning with the assertion, based on the work of Elizabeth Wilson, that modern "fashion is obsessed with gender," it brings to attention ways in which feminine identity is articulated and negotiated through dress and personal appearance (E. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago, 1985), p. 117). Once more the thread of second-wave feminist attitudes is woven into the text, and focuses on the understanding of fashion as a form of bondage, one result of which was a famous trashing of bras, girdles and stiletto heels during a 1960s Miss America beauty pageant.

A more contemporary reference is the "waif" or "heroin" look of the 1990s, which has been linked with unrealistic and unhealthy demands young girls placed on their own bodies. Two feminist strategies emerged to rectify these practices: a rejection of feminine fashion in favour of masculine dress, and a call to withdraw from the paradigm of fashion altogether by adopting a "natural" look to reflect an authentic female self. From her perspective, Hollows finds it "highly problematic" even to try to consider a natural or authentic feminine identity outside of culture. In other words, even a feminist natural look is a cultural construct and can no more identify what women are *really* like than any other style, especially because the issue of what *women* are like itself overlooks the diversity of perceptions and practices that Hollows repeatedly asserts.

Instead of an approach that promotes ways to correct or improve dressing practices, Hollows favours an analysis of clothing and beauty practices as a means of articulating various forms of contemporary femininity. Fashion practices can hence be explored as means to subvert assumptions about gender differences and gendered behaviour, and also to consider how "everyday fashion and beauty practices work to construct, produce or 'perform' a feminine self." Such endeavours demand, both on the part of the fashion producer and the researcher, a sensitivity to the language of clothes, which itself is mediated by race, class, age and time, through a variety of vehicles such as women's magazines, television, and so forth. Hollows concludes that fashion practices, not passively followed but, rather, actively engaged, "do not simply reproduce femininity, but involve the production of a feminine self." Once more, at the end of this enlightening chapter, one wishes that Hollows put her investigative skills where her ideology is, and conduct her own primary sourcework on the artifacts themselves.

Hollows' chapter on culture and material consumption nicely forms the link between her

book and that on Tupperware. She argues that "consumption is not simply a process in which commodities are bought" but rather that such commodities are given meaning by being actively incorporated into the lives of their consumers. Moreover, "the ways in which these consumer goods are used are practices through which cultural identities are formed and reformed." Referring to one of Alison Clarke's earlier articles on Tupperware as well as the revisionist work of other feminists, Hollows seeks to dispel the notion that 1950s suburban women obsessed about consumer goods, and followed blindly the urge to satisfy false needs cooked up through advertising and other forms of social control. For example, she cites research that reveals that whereas architects and designers took it upon themselves in some experimental projects deliberately to impose a rational, modernist order on the design and configuration of houses and their contents, the "universal meanings" that were supposed to be inherent in these demonstrations of "good design" were "often either rejected or negotiated or redefined in use." Apparently, women were more reluctant than previously allowed for, to put aside their own class- and gender-specific tastes and preferences. Their domestic environment, then, could be seen as one which ultimately empowered them by allowing for the articulation of their own authority within it.

As befits her qualifications as an expert in material culture, Alison Clarke sets up her research on the basis of meticulous and thoughtful contact with physical and other artifacts associated with Tupperware: the containers themselves; manuals for users and salespeople; photographs; oral histories, and advertisements. The result is a convincing argument to reopen the debate about the cumulative repercussions of Tupperware as an anti-feminist icon.

Two elements of Clarke's argument come into high relief, especially in the context of Hollows' book. One is the extent to which the success story of Tupperware depended on its appeal having been mediated, not primarily through its aesthetic, but through social valorization. Clarke sets up her study by establishing an opposition between the perception of Tupperware as a manifestation of modernist ideals, and the reading and appreciation of this product in terms of the degree to which it stood as a marker with positive connotations in the lives of its users. She lists the various exhibitions of Tupperware at prestigious institutions such as New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1956, which gave its "carefully-

considered shapes” and functionalist aesthetic an elitist imprimatur by situating it within the paradigm of modernism, in contrast to the “ostentatious frippery of brightly coloured, overdesigned gadgetry.”

Even the designers of Tupperware seemed uncomfortable with this reductionist approach to the product, Earl Tupper himself deliberately taking inspiration from vernacular handicrafts since “unlike writing, talking or indirect day dreaming...handcrafts do not entertain any high flown abstractions.” Instead, Clarke reveals that the true secret to Tupperware’s success lay, not as a beacon of “good taste,” but in the attempt of its creators to target human relations, by reconfiguring and promoting the role of the homemaker as a contemporary “hostess,” and by catering to her needs by providing, as revealed in one Tupperware catalogue, “such accessories as...are essential to the hostess who wants all her invitations eagerly sought after.”

Aware that “activities such as home decoration and flower arranging valorized household labour,” companies such as Tupper’s — and Coca Cola as well — linked “socially-aspiring” activities with their broadly-distributed brand-name products and rode the crest of the consumerist wave. Tupperware also enhanced its own prestige in terms of making itself available as an “inalienable” object, by taking commissions to create promotional material for companies to give away as gifts. In this manner, “bounded...by such social ties as sentiment and reciprocity,” it took on additional social meaning and significance. Clarke discovers that it was precisely the significance of Tupperware as gift items, rather than as a strictly functional object, that was the basis of its first commercial success. These socially-valorizing practices, added to the rise of the Tupperware party as an undisputedly successful marketing strategy of the time, gave Tupperware its cachet and its esteemed status as one of the most famous North-American consumer products of the 1950s.

Clarke’s second key strategy in the book is to posit a new approach to the debate that originally resided in second-wave feminist discourse, and which saw Tupperware-ism as one more anaesthetizing, commodifying means to deprive women of their own choices and own identity. The Tupperware party, by 1951 the exclusive retail distribution method for the product, was especially condemned: characteristically hosted by a woman who invited her friends to witness a promotion and demonstration of products by Tupperware salespeople — usually also women — it was seen

to exploit existing social channels for profit, since the host would receive free Tupperware in proportion to the number of purchases she and her friends consequently made. On the contrary, Clarke strives to dispel this stereotype of “1950s women as domestic, quiescent victims of corporate capitalism.”

Women that Clarke interviewed in her research for this project “frequently spoke of their involvement with Tupperware not just as a means of circumventing the limitations of their domestic and economic situations but as a positive and self-determining experience.” From the production and distribution perspective, “Tupperware corporate culture offered an alternative to the patriarchal structures of conventional sales structures, which many women, completely alienated from the conventional workplace, wholeheartedly embraced.” Although corporate advertising for the containers depicted the Tupperware purchaser consistently as white, middle-class, and suburban, actual sales were aimed at minority women as well.

Moreover, Tupperware dealers came from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds and habitually included divorced women and single mothers, the most famous of whom was Brownie Wise. She began her career as a salesperson who perfected the sales technique of the Tupperware party, rose through the ranks of the company to become its vice-president, and, before losing in a head-to-head challenge against the inventor, Earl Tupper, himself, wielded true power in her position and even appeared on the cover of *Business Week* magazine in 1954.

There is strong merit, then, to this book, in problematising the earlier, simplistic feminist stance toward Tupperware and its selling methods, and, even more importantly, in its endorsement of the study of mass consumption and “feminine culture” as “wholly valid aspects of women’s history.” In promoting the study of women and consumer culture, Clarke places her priority squarely on a comprehensive feminist historiography: attention ought not to be focused disproportionately on certain constituencies, for example, politicized and working women, because “unless the lives of nonradical women involved in a feminine popular culture that embraced consumerism and glamour are acknowledged, the mendacious elitism previously ascribed to white patriarchal history prevails here as well.”

If Clarke is convincing in her recasting of Tupperware and its ethos as creating opportunities for women’s empowerment, even

she alludes to occasions which do not exactly highlight the long way that women have come. Perhaps the most disturbing is the 1954 "Big Dig" Homecoming Jubilee, which took place on the Tupperware company grounds. Sales people were invited to attend the festivities, metaphorically presented as an American gold-rush adventure. Distributorships were issued "sites" on a "Big Dig" map of the area on the basis of sales, with the highest-selling attendants permitted to advance furthest along the trail to where the richest deposits were. Buried under the ground was an estimated \$48,500 worth of prizes, including mink stoles and diamond rings, and the object was for each person to dig frantically to unearth as many of these objects as possible. *Life* magazine reported on this "All-Girl Gathering" and CBS televised the festivities,

no doubt tempting other women to consider a career in the same field. Literally encouraging women to get down and dirty by competing head-on with each other for luxury items, this event seems to epitomize the most negative aspects of the Tupperware phenomenon.

No longer is the Tupperware party the key means of distributing these plastic paragons. Today they are marketed at shopping malls, no doubt a consequence of the rise in the number of women employed outside the home, who have less time or inclination to host such gatherings. As for my mother, her own contemporary gesture of empowerment is to take a drive to the nearest dollar store. There, anonymously, she can make her selection of containers, buying only and whatever is desirable and convenient.

### **Maurice Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera: A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator, and Historian***

RUSSELL JOHNSTON

Rickards, Maurice. *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera: A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator, and Historian*. Ed. Michael Twyman, with the assistance of Sally de Beaumont and Amoret Tanner. New York: Routledge, 2000. x, 402 pp., cloth, \$98, ISBN 0-415-92648-3.

*The Encyclopedia of Ephemera* was clearly a labour of love for its creators: its writer, the late Maurice Rickards, and its editor, Michael Twyman. Rickards was a scholar and collector of paper ephemera, and Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Ephemera Studies at the University of Reading. This reference work was first planned in 1971. Before his death in 1998, Rickards had researched and written almost four hundred of the entries included. Twyman, also at Reading, commissioned some forty more to complete the manuscript and to include new topics that date from 1980. The result is a stylistically seamless work that bears the enthusiasm of a collector. Chronologically, it spans the history of printed paper; geographically, its strength is Great Britain, though topics range into continental Europe and North America.

"Ephemera" is a term without a universally recognized definition. Here it is defined by Rickards as "the minor transient documents of everyday life," rendered chiefly from paper. It is, as Twyman

notes, an unsatisfactory term for analytical purposes, and has been adopted for its resilience rather than its rigour (p. v).

The encyclopedia attempts to refine its scope through example rather than argument, and consequently a very wide range of objects has been included. There are some items which enjoyed domestic popularity, such as silhouettes, envelopes, and lavatory paper, while other items are the official detritus of state agencies: election papers, postal-strike labels, and riot acts, to name three. However, by far the majority of the entries describe items commercial in nature. Examples of such items include account books, ships' deck plans, and bank notes. Certain printing terms are also explained, among them Braille, tinsel printing, and electrotyping. After that, there are some oddities in the mix: wax letter seals may be understandable, given their link to paper goods, but pressed flowers, shellac "advertising records," and "silks" (printed textiles) seem to test the compilers' own boundaries. The one thing that seems to unite all of these is their appeal to collectors — a characteristic imparted to said items through the beauty of their craft or their curiosity value.

Suitably for a reference work, the individual entries are more functional than interpretive, though they are written in an engaging and