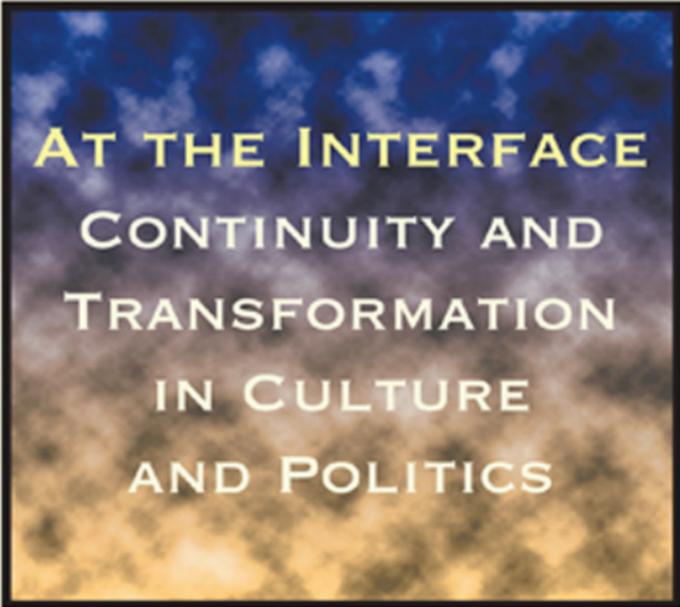


At the Interface



AT THE INTERFACE
CONTINUITY AND
TRANSFORMATION
IN CULTURE
AND POLITICS

EDITED BY

JOSS HANDS
&
EUGENIA SIAPERA

Probing the Boundaries

At the Interface:
Continuity and Transformation in
Culture and Politics

At the Interface

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Volume 20

A volume in the *Probing the Boundaries* project
'Transformations in Politics, Culture and Society'

Probing the Boundaries

At the Interface:
Continuity and Transformation in
Culture and Politics

Edited by

Joss Hands & Eugenia Siapera



Amsterdam – New York, NY 2004

The paper on which this book is printed meets the requirements of “ISO 9706:1994, Information and documentation – Paper of documents – Requirements for permanence”.

ISBN: 90-420-1732-5

©Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam – New York, NY 2004

Printed in The Netherlands

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Welcome to a *Probing the Boundaries* Project

Transformations in Politics, Culture and Society is an inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary project which seeks to examine the emerging idea of 'transformation' and understand the associated models of change which are being developed in relation to it. The project aims to identify and assess the impact of transformations in politics, culture, and society. The role of media in provoking, supporting and representing such changes - for example, art and art history, cinema and film, literature and poetry, music, newspapers, and television and radio - will also be explored.

The project will critically engage with a number of core themes;

- dissolution, liberation, reconstruction; political, and economic rejuvenation
- invasion, resistance, revolution
- the place of street drama, posters, graffiti
- the importance of land
- education, student rebellions, and the role of the intelligentsia
- cultural revolutions: status of women, feminism, sexual freedom; representations of gender, ethnicity, sexuality; pornography; cultural difference and otherness
- international confrontation; the impact of globalisation
- third world issues
- medical and social issues in film
- role of religion and religious institutions
- influence of new technologies and access to data
- the role of the law and legal processes

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Introduction

Eugenia Siapera & Joss Hands

In a world increasingly characterised by flows of capital, persons and ideas, change and transformation acquires an unprecedented gravity. These multiple flows generate new patterns of economics, power and communication as well as a set of responses to such patterns. The force with which the ensuing process of transformation, continuity and struggle is re-organising the lived environment is startling. Thus there is an imperative for those that are subject, and party to, these dynamic encounters to make sense of them through contextualisation, reflection and a sharing of intellectual resources.

While such reflexivity has been theoretically captured by social theory¹, we have yet to chronicle the cultural changes and continuities that weave the fabric of our societies. To reflect requires that we stop for a moment, look back and trace our trajectory. This will reveal where the boundaries of society, culture, power and politics are made porous, disintegrate, are intensified or indeed are constituted anew. Such understanding is vital in that it creates new spaces for action. It is only through recording and mapping where these spheres meet, break apart and are reconstituted to form the 'scapes'² in which we live that we can hope to better understand where we stand, and perhaps even the routes available to us.

It was in this spirit of shared resources and reflection that the conference that led to this book was convened. Scholars from across disciplines as diverse as political science, cultural and communication studies, psychology, philosophy and journalism gathered to offer new perspectives and shared dilemmas.

The themes, or spheres, of culture and politics emerged as the substantive overarching concern of the academics and writers present. From its elitist connotations to its anthropological definitions, culture has always been political. At the same time, one has only to look at multicultural struggles to see the potency of the cultural within the political. However, the two are not co-terminus, and it is precisely the intensification and blurring of this boundary that underlies this book. The chapters, in their own distinct and individual ways, trace how culture and politics are both separate, but interwoven, and from their combination we can garner a picture of the construction, transgression and intensification of the boundaries that both link and divide these elemental spheres.

Hence, chapters that foreground the cultural element were grouped together in the first part, while chapters prioritising the political comprise the second part of the book. Finally, in the third part, chapters explicitly address both elements.

The first part on Culture raises important issues of transformations in ideas, narratives, lifestyles, identities, as chapters here deal with topics such as religion (Way), gender (van Bauwel), and lifestyle (Maddison and Storr). In dealing with such diverse themes, these chapters highlight both the complexities and the interrelatedness of contemporary cultural forms. In so doing, they throw into question the very boundedness of culture and foreground its susceptibility to political and historical context. Following actual everyday practices through focusing on film and television, chapters in this part tease out precisely the changes and continuities that characterise contemporary cultural practices. Steven Maddison and Merl Storr critically examine the popular narrative of *Bridget Jones's Diary* by looking at the way in which it actually reinforces the very boundaries it seeks to transgress. They draw a parallel between this popular book and subsequent film and the current hegemony of neo-liberal capitalism, thereby showing the mutual reliance of cultural formats on political narratives. A similar dynamic is manifest in the analysis of gender bending narratives and practices in Sofie van Bauwel's chapter. In exposing the discrepancies between the theorising of gender bending and its actual reception by young television audiences, she shows that the academic and artistic subversion of boundaries does not necessarily have a popular counterpart. In this respect, if the political objective of gender bending has been to question gender boundaries through cultural practice, its equivocal and multiple readings point to the irreducibility of culture to politics, and the difficulties of translating cultural practices into political gains. A similar degree of ambiguity can be discerned in Maria Way's analysis of the Papacy's relationship with the mass media. By describing the changing relationship between the two institutions, Way shows the difficulties in attempting to harness cultural forms for political ends.

If the focus above has been on the cultural, the second part offers a different perspective, prioritising the political. Chapters here revisit the relationship between the press and politics (Omenugha and van den Vyuer), and examine the novel political relationships fostered by new technologies (Tunc, Siapera, Hands). Kate Omenugha's chapter shows clearly the direct involvement of the news media in power politics: the political use of news media by the diverse groups comprising Nigeria points to the dangers of excessive partisanship coupled with a lack of a common media culture. The potency of the media as a political tool is, however, great, when summoned by civil society. Braam van der Vyver's report from South Africa provides strong evidence of the political force generated by the bonds of culture and community.

While the above two chapters show the struggle between the cultural and the political, the next three, in focusing on new media and technologies, examine the dynamics and tensions generated as both politics and culture move into a new arena. Thus, Asli Tunc's chapter on

the attempt to regulate the Internet in Turkey, shows the inadequacies of existing political structures in coping with this new context. By pointing to the inability of official politics to regulate and control the dynamic and open Internet use in Turkey, Tunc shows the extent to which Internet cultures force change upon even the most rigid political interests. When, however, the Internet is used by established government agencies, its effects can be truly ambiguous. This is the argument pursued in Eugenia Siapera's chapter. Focusing on the politics of asylum, Siapera shows the instrumental usage of the Internet by both refugee support NGOs and relevant government agencies in the UK, thereby pointing to the difficulties in normatively assessing the relationship of the Internet and politics. The task of normatively theorising this relationship is taken up by Joss Hands. In his chapter, Hands seeks to outline the dangers involved in separating the normative from the ideal. Mobilising Albert Camus' idea of relative utopia, Hands provides a conceptual bridge that can then guide our political encounters with the Internet. All these articles highlight the idea that culture provides the ground of politics: its fragmentation/polarization in Nigeria, its mobilisation in South Africa, its ongoing struggle in Turkey, its tensions in Britain, and its hopes in civil society, show that culture is the *sine qua non* for politics.

The chapters in the third part explore precisely this inextricability of culture and politics. The issue of racism is taken up by Shane Lachtman, whose focus is on sport, and specifically on Major League Baseball. Critically examining the ways in which certain individuals are stigmatised as racist while at the same time racist structures remain intact, Lachtman alerts us to the problems of attending to culture without attending to politics, echoing Walter Benjamin's³ remark on the aesthetisation of politics. Reinhart Lutz's chapter on the filmic reinterpretation of the Viet Nam war clearly shows the intricate connections between culture and politics. Thus, the Hollywood film *When We Were Soldiers* seeks to politically revalorize America's involvement in the Viet Nam war ultimately having ambiguous results. Finally, Emine Onculer's chapter shows that the collective re-imagining of national identity is fraught with dangers. Examining the recent Turkish film *Salkim Hanim'in Taneleri*, Onculer points to the marginalisation of certain groups involved in this one-sided effort, thereby reminding us of the multidimensionality of culture. It is here that the irreducibility of culture to politics becomes clear: the political aim of modernisation in Turkey appears only achievable through the effacement of marginal voices. Such voices, nevertheless, demand to be heard both culturally and politically.

We believe, as editors of this collection, that the chapters below constitute a necessary moment of reflection. At the same time, however, they also constitute an active process of engagement with the urgent questions forced upon us by the flows of ideas, persons and capital alluded

to earlier. While this process can never be complete, this book represents and documents the first step of an ongoing dialogue and a fruitful intellectual exchange.

Amsterdam, July 2003

Joss Hands
Eugenia Siapera
(Editors)

Notes

- ¹ Ulrich Beck, Giddens Anthony, and Lash, Scott, ed., *Reflexive Modernisation* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).
² Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
³ Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction in *Illuminations* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1973).

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Beck, Ulrich, Giddens Anthony, and Lash, Scott, ed. *Reflexive Modernisation*. Cambridge: Polity, 1994.
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Part I

Cultural Politics

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The Edge of Reason: the Myth of Bridget Jones

Stephen Maddison & Merl Storr

Abstract

In this chapter we attempt to uncover some of the political myths that underpin the popularity of the character of Bridget Jones, in both the two novels by Helen Fielding, and in the film of 2001. Our starting point is the widespread acclaim and recognition that Fielding's character has garnered: she has been said to encapsulate "the spirit of the age". We suggest that the popularity of the Bridget character rests in part on the identification solicited by her 'ditziness', a particularly postfeminist construction of heterosexual femininity. We also suggest that the novels are highly racialised and marked by strong class difference, where both sets of material and political inequalities are naturalised in the context of Bridget's narratively disaster-prone life. We indicate ways in which the gender, class and racial myths of Bridget Jones reaffirm neo-liberal ideology, which abstracts the individual from the material context of which s/he is a product.

Key words

Feminism; postfeminism; femininity; popular culture; class; whiteness; heterosexuality; neo-liberalism.

1. Introduction

'That's what's so silly about feminism, darling. Anyone with an ounce of sense knows we're the superior race and the only nigger in the woodpile is –'
'Mother!'
'— when they think they can sit around when they retire and not do any housework. [...] I don't know! You all seem to have some silly idea about getting Indiana Jones in your house loading the dishwasher. You have to train them.'¹

Bridget Jones is no mere fictional character, she's the Spirit of the Age. Her diary presents a perfect zeitgeist of single female woes. It rings with the unmistakable tone of something that is true to the marrow and captures what – alas – it is like to be female. Any woman of a certain age

can recognise elements of Bridget in herself. Indeed she is far more than the patron saint of single women: she is everyman, or rather, everyperson. She is the most enchanting heroine for the millennium.²

Actually of course Bridget Jones *is* a mere fictional character, albeit an exceptionally successful one. Helen Fielding's 1996 novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* has sold well over ten million copies in more than 30 languages worldwide.³ It was followed by an enormously successful sequel novel, *Bridget Jones: the Edge of Reason*, first published in 1999. The 2001 film *Bridget Jones's Diary* made more money in the UK in its first weekend than any previous British film; at the time of writing a sequel film is in production. So if Bridget Jones is the spirit of the age, what age is this, and what kind of spirit? In this chapter we want to assess whether Bridget Jones is the symbol of political, cultural or social transformation that so many critics have claimed that she is. Our argument is that if anything she is the opposite: a symbol of conservatism, neo-liberalism and postfeminism. Our opening quote from *The Edge of Reason* encapsulates those themes. Bridget's mother's "common sense" is reassuring precisely insofar as it produces a postfeminist attack on feminism and a neo-liberal sneer at "politically correct" objections to racism.

It seems unlikely that many readers and viewers believe Bridget literally to be a real person:⁴ her *reality* is an illusion created by the extraordinarily powerful ways in which the novels and films interpellate their audience, especially their heterosexual female audience. The "That's me!" reaction noted by Whelehan⁵ and a host of other critics has also been strongly experienced by our own students when we have used *Bridget Jones's Diary* in the classroom, and was neatly summed up by one student who stopped Merl in the corridor one afternoon to announce excitedly "I AM BRIDGET JONES".

Fielding's use of the first person confessional idiom was one of the things that made the original Bridget Jones newspaper column, later to become the first novel, so popular and engaging, and *Bridget Jones's Diary* is much fresher, funnier and less strained than *The Edge of Reason*. Each diary entry begins with a tally of Bridget's weight, how many alcohol units she has consumed, how many cigarettes, how many calories, and an account of whatever other ongoing self-help regimen she is engaged in, including the number of positive thoughts she has had, the number of serious current affairs articles she has read, the number of National Lottery Instants scratch cards she has bought, and so on. The organisation and repetition of this account is the source of much of the "Bridget terminology" that has entered the wider culture, and it comments ironically on the kinds of pressures middle-class white women supposedly face in being women. Indeed the back jacket blurb of *Bridget Jones's Diary* suggests that this commentary may constitute (among other things)

“a dazzling urban satire of modern human relations”. However in our view it is overstating the case to suggest that this commentary, however amusing, constitutes successful satire, which we would take to be a political critique of social values, ridiculing and denaturalising them. In fact we argue that the effect of the comedy in these texts is rather more insidious than progressive.

The slippage from self-conscious suspension of disbelief to interpellated over-identification embodied in the “That’s me!” reaction can also be seen in journalistic accounts of Bridget and her many media forays. Some of these constitute Bridget Jones as a noun rather than a fictional character (for example, a piece in *The Guardian* about the number of home-owning single women describes such women as “Bridget Joneses”⁶). Others seem wilfully to overlook the fact that she does not really exist in their enthusiasm to position her as their ego ideal or ideal sexual partner. For example, a generally critical review of the video and DVD release of the film concludes, “It’s a real shame because I wanted to get on with her as well as everyone else seemed to ... But Bridget and I just weren’t destined to be best buddies”.⁷ Most striking is Tony Parsons’ ongoing love affair with his fantasy Bridget in his column in *The Mirror*. Parsons manages simultaneously to hail the filmic Bridget because “a real woman looks like Bridget Jones” with her apparently fleshy excess,⁸ and at the same time to use his fantasy Bridget, “Bambi with a fag in her mouth and a bad man between her thighs”,⁹ to deride contemporary women and feminism.

Our purpose in this chapter is to treat Bridget Jones not as a *real* woman, nor indeed as a *real* expression of the zeitgeist, but as a *myth*, in the sense of myth as “depoliticised speech”.¹⁰ We take it as axiomatic that culture is political and that popular culture is an arena of popular politics. In a well known statement of cultural materialism, Alan Sinfield writes: “Literary writing, like all cultural production, operates through an appeal for recognition: ‘The world is like *this*, isn’t it?’ it says in effect; and that has to be political”.¹¹ It is precisely the success of Bridget’s appeal for recognition, the “That’s me!” effect, that makes “her” (it) such a politically potent myth. In this chapter we want to focus on three predominant sites of recognition. Firstly Bridget’s ditziness is foregrounded and rendered heterosexually attractive. The fact that Bridget, despite her class, education and professional status, is a one-woman disaster area is certainly the root of the humour in both the film and the novels, and is arguably also the single most important point of identification for the audience. Secondly Bridget’s whiteness is naturalised and unmarked. The fact that not only Bridget herself but all of her significant friends and family are white is apparently unnoticed both by the readers and by the characters, and yet it underpins both the narrative(s) and the characterisations in the novels. Thirdly, within our consideration

of femininity and whiteness, we will be indicating ways in which the novels constitute class. We will be suggesting that Fielding represents Bridget's world as unproblematically middle class, and renders the particular privileges of this world in such a way as to efface class difference, and to naturalise the differential privileges available to neo-liberal subjects, by reducing class to cultural capital in ways which occlude material inequity.

2. **Bridget the Neurotic Sex Symbol**

Bridget Jones's Diary invites readers to recognize themselves in the woes of Bridget's obsession with her weight, her boozing and bingeing (as well as relishing the incitement to pleasure that her daily tabulations also represent), and as we have noted this interpellation appears to be successful. What is being offered as appealing is a fantasy about the impossibility of emotional or bodily control, where that lack of control and the irrationality it underwrites will become unproblematic with the consummation of heterosexual romance. In narrative terms, in *Bridget Jones's Diary* instability, mutability and neurosis will be progressively solved by meeting a man, having sex, then going on mini-breaks with him, overcoming a range of narrative obstacles (having spots, being fat, smoking too much, getting drunk) in order finally, after much deferral, to marry him.

The narrative logic of both novels is that given any emotionally significant circumstances the last thing that should happen is for Bridget to take responsibility for initiating or participating in rational discussion. This ditziness produces contradictory and complex meanings, none of which is successfully satirical. Bridget's friends Shazzer, Jude and Magda function not only to offer the pleasures of female bonding which mitigate their "man trouble" with shopping sprees and bouts of boozing, but to naturalise and normalise Bridget. All of Bridget's friends are more dysfunctional than she is – either by being more feminist, which is constituted as unfeminine, strident and emotionally uptight (Shazzer), or by being even more out of control, that is, *too* neurotic to be acceptably feminine (Jude). Self-determination and personal liberation are represented in the novels as unattainable delusional fantasies ("Am assured, receptive, responsive woman of substance who does not take responsibility for others' behaviour. Only for own. Yes," Bridget tells herself helplessly.¹²) This is underwritten by Bridget's internal self-policing discourse about the guilty necessity of being a "feminist" in order to avoid total degradation and humiliation, while always naturalising the unattractiveness of being perceived as a feminist by men: "After all, there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism".¹³

Despite the first person confessional idiom of both novels, there are numerous instances in which Bridget shares information with her diary where Fielding is offering us insight unavailable to Bridget herself. These authorial ploys invariably demonstrate Bridget's ditziness or lack of self-awareness. At key moments in the texts readers know more than Bridget knows herself, but crucially this knowledge situates us as affectionately protective of, or sympathetic to, her naiveté and gaucheness. For example, after the publication of her disastrous newspaper interview with Colin Firth, Bridget writes in her diary: "Have not heard anything back from Adam or Michael at *Independent* but sure they will ring soon and maybe ask me to do another one, then can be freelance in home office, typing on roof terrace with herbs in terracotta pots!"¹⁴ This device is most evident in *The Edge of Reason* while Bridget and Mark Darcy are estranged. At a number of middle-class social events – a weekend house party in the country, Magda's daughter's birthday party – Bridget's diary entries apparently unwittingly cue us about Mark's continuing desire for her. At one level, this device works to secure the romantic plotting of the novel and to reassure readers by offering them familiar generic codes that promise a resolution in which Mark and Bridget will be romantically reunited. At the level of myth, this cueing works to signify Bridget's naiveté and lack of control as heterosexually desirable, as engendering masculine rescue, masculine lust, masculine protectiveness. One key way in which Bridget's vulnerability is marked in these episodes is her gauche lack of cultural capital. For example, at a "scary party" in *Bridget Jones's Diary* where all the other women are quoting Shakespeare and discussing opera, Bridget's detailed knowledge of the TV gameshow *Blind Date* makes her far more attractive to the hero, for whom the women talking about high culture are pretentious and undesirable.

This ideological codification of ditziness and lack of control as heterosexually desirable sits uneasily alongside the more overt attempts Fielding makes to engender a satirical critique of relationships. The novels may circulate categorisations like "smug marrieds" and "singletons" which appear to offer a satirical commentary on the social status of those with access to the structural privileges of marriage, but in both *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *The Edge of Reason* the complexities of sexual and intimate relationships are narratively never a function of systemic structural matters, and thus the categories of "smug marrieds" and "singletons" function merely as poles for Bridget's neurotic ambivalence about relationships. The discourses offered by Bridget's self-help manuals (all 37 of them) provide substance for Bridget's fatalistic internal dialogue rather than for a reading of the instability and contested nature of contemporary gender roles within heterosexuality. Whatever "crisis of identity" Bridget represents, it is one of personal neurosis rather than one