

Mica Nava on the pleasures of being seventeen **Teeny Bopping**

Angela McRobbie's new book **Feminism And Youth Culture: From Jackie To Just Seventeen** (Macmillan, hbk £35, pbk £9.99) has an extraordinarily striking and apt cover. Based on a painting by an early-80s Berlin Realist, it depicts enigmatically two adolescent girls standing arm in arm, geared out with shades and boogie box and dressed in clothes which accentuate their stockily sensual bodies. Simultaneously bold and innocent, neither abject nor objects of our gaze, they are self-absorbed and self-contained: available to each other. This is a femininity we are not accustomed to seeing.

And this is the contribution of Angela McRobbie's book. Several of the articles in this important collection produced over the last ten years and gathered together in this volume for the first time,

focus particularly on *ordinary* femininity. The heroines here are not the rebels who step out of line to protest against their condition, but the conformers, those who are preoccupied with romance, pop icons and their appearances; those who read girls' magazines like *Jackie* and *Just Seventeen* and want to be dancers; those who cope, while only teenagers themselves, with being single mothers.

Through her seminal textual analysis and careful ethnography, Angela McRobbie has, over the years, claimed these disparaged teenyboppers and their pleasures and preoccupations for the serious attention of feminists and cultural theorists. She has insisted that we look as discerningly and sympathetically at their world as at the more spectacular street cult-



ures of their brothers and more militant sisters, and recognize (as the painting on the cover of the book does) the complexity and subtlety of feminine strategies of survival.

However, this book does more than foreground girls' experience and the culture of femininity. It also makes a number of more general theoretical interventions. In this category is the reprint of 'Settling Accounts With Subcultures', the classic feminist critique of the early youth studies of Dick Hebdige and Paul Willis, which also insists innovatively on drawing attention to the relationship between the personal history of an author and his or her theoretical work. Also in this category, but published for the first time in this volume,

is the article '*Jackie And Just Seventeen*' which not only records changes in the content of girls' magazines over the 80s (since McRobbie's original analysis of the late 70s, also included here) but registers theoretical developments as well through its attention to the ways in which girls as readers both construct their own meanings and interact with the texts.

'Dance Narratives And Fantasies Of Achievement', a reworking of an earlier essay, is another important piece which explores how popular ballet books and cinematic narratives like *Fame* offer girls the possibility of imagining themselves fully engaged in their work, independent of their families

and effectively 'taking destiny into their own hands'. There has been no other attempt that I know of to theorise dance and its particular appeal for girls. This will therefore rank as another influential piece of investigation alongside the work on teenage magazines.

Always an elegant and lucid writer, Angela McRobbie is at her best doing cultural analysis. What we see here is some of the work which backs up her important argument (published elsewhere) that the popular and fragmented nature of post-modern culture yields itself to a more positive interpretation than most of the pessimistic (and male) theorists of postmodernism would have us believe.*