

Marianne Gullestad (1946-2008)

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Marianne Gullestad, a distinguished Norwegian anthropologist has just passed away on Tuesday 10/03/08. In recent years she was working in Oslo and previous to that mainly in Trondheim. She was also twice a visiting scholar in Chicago. Her books in English, in addition to many in Norwegian were:-

2007 *Picturing Pity: Pitfalls and Pleasures in Cross-Cultural Communication. Word and Image in a North Cameroon Mission.* Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2007.

2006 *Plausible Prejudice: Everyday Practices and Social Images of Nation, Culture and Race.* Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2006.

1997 With Martine Segalen, (eds.) *Family and Kinship in Europe.* London: Pinter, 1997. (English edition of a book published in French in 1995.)

1996 *Everyday Life Philosophers: Modernity, Morality and Autobiography in Norway.* Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.

1996 *Imagined Childhoods: Constructions of Childhood in Autobiographical Accounts* (Edited volume). Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.

1992 *The Art of Social Relations. Essays on Culture, Thought and Social Action in Modern Norway.* Oslo: Scandinavian University Press. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Scandinavian Library).

1984 *Kitchen-Table Society: A Case Study of the Family Life and Friendships of Young Working-Class Mothers in Urban Norway.* Oslo: Scandinavian University Press / Oxford University Press. (Two reprints.)

She was a vivacious and impressive individual as well as an outstanding scholar. I was privileged to be asked to write the introduction to a re-issue of her book *Kitchen Table Society*. I was pleased and honoured to be asked since it was one of the publications that most influenced by own work, and is a classic in material culture studies. I have re-printed here some of my earlier comments:- *Kitchen Table Society* could be taken as the starting point for the material culture study of the home interior, and yet what I want to emphasise is, paradoxically, the degree to which this was not a study of the home interior per.se. Indeed, what made this such an important work when it first came out was, rather, that it was in many respects a conventional ethnography - though of the type of population that, on the whole, had not been the subject of conventional ethnographies. The topic was working class women in the town of Bergen on the West coast of Norway. What made this special was that there was nothing special about these people. They were not being studied because they were a problem that academics were supposed to shed light on, such as drug-takers or the unemployed. They represented the neglected topic of the merely ordinary. What makes this conventional, I would say classic, as ethnography is the unremarked focus on what might be called the totality of their lives. The book takes its scope from the obvious experiential sense that these women had of their own lives that everything they did came together because it related to them. Their activity as workers in employment, as housewives, as parents or lovers are all integrated in their experience. Ethnography with its commitment to a holistic approach is intended to reflect that

sense of totality.

As a result much of the book is about these women's work, how they deal with the state and with the market, their husbands and their children. But as Norwegians they happen to particularly exacerbate certain tendencies that are characteristic of contemporary secular modernity. The condition that most academics and many populations inhabit today. They live in a world that centres on the private domain, behind the closed doors of the family house. While we may well be more integrated with global economics and politics than the population of any previous period, a good deal of this happens in our living rooms. This integration and exposure occurs through encounters mediated by television and the internet which is where every day we feel so close we can almost rub noses with the politicians and the celebrities we know about in common.

As it happens, if we are turning our attention to the private sphere, what better place to be working than a society that was renowned for its attachment to that very sphere? Norway would be alongside Japan as amongst the first nations one would think of as regions where the privacy of the individual household is at a premium. If the private life of Norwegians could be excavated there was hope that this could be done almost anywhere. By the same token it is women who are clearly the gender that have in so many societies been allocated responsibilities that we associate with the domestic sphere. The neglect of women, their labour and their lives more generally, becomes here central to our failure to understand the nature of our own societies as a whole. This requires not only an understanding of the neglected topic of what women actually do, but a concern with the problem of what has generated the relationships and practice of gender more generally. In addition, in many societies that regard themselves as modern, it is the working class that are regarded as the ordinary, the quotidian. So, as a place to start an anthropology of the private home, working class housewives in Norway seems to have been a particularly appropriate topic with which to begin.

I have no reason to think that Gullestad was particularly influenced by material culture studies or even its elder cousin (that has thrived in Norway) the study of Ethnology, with its fascination with topics such as hunters knives or fishing vessels. Rather it is the centrality of the home itself which, as a good anthropologist, she came to acknowledge and give attention to both in this book and in a subsequent article on the art of home decoration (1992). In a way I would argue it is particularly important that home decoration came to be regarded as a central part of the lives of people for someone for whom this was not an intended topic. This seems a far more convincing argument for its importance than merely a new development in, say, furnishing studies or design history. Indeed there is an underlying issue here, which is that ethnography itself had previously tended to flourish in social settings which are relatively public and accessible. The challenge faced by Gullestad and those of us who have followed her was to penetrate behind the closed doors of highly private societies to work in the place of privacy itself, something that most disciplines that rely on questionnaires and focus groups fail to attempt let alone achieve.

What role then does home decoration have for these women in Gullestad's account? The title of her book, *Kitchen-Table Society*, indicates its prominence. These are women whose closest relations are often with other housewives and the common activity of reciprocal visiting and chatting around the kitchen table. This chat is itself of major importance, since one of the core

characteristics of modern society, by which term I allude to the decline of religion and other forms of legitimation for customary behaviour, is the search for normativity. That is, our concerns and often our anxieties revolve around the basic decision as to just what is the right and appropriate thing to do and say. For these women it is the constant referring back to each other's behaviour that determines which act of adultery was beyond the pale and which group of bosses or students should be pilloried and reviled. From the point of view of social science, of course, this striving for the normative, for a moral consensus, has been central to academic discussion from Durkheim through to Weber. Most of the major early theorists of the social sciences wanted to understand how a society that had lost its traditional structures of legitimation managed still to develop moral and social norms that people could adhere to.

So a Kitchen-Table Society is one in which society creates one of its most important instruments for reproducing itself around the kitchen-table. Most ethnographies might have drawn attention to this without much thought for the kitchen table itself, but Gullestad is aware that the frame within which the overt activity takes place, as in most frames for behaviour, becomes essential to the possibility of the behaviour and its direction. Kitchen-table societies require the right kitchen. This group of women have to feel that their ability to potentially achieve consensus, to trust each other's opinions and secrets, depends on a recognition that each is 'one of us'. Norway is a particularly egalitarian society and being one of us means that the kitchen must reflect a careful balance. The two crimes to be avoided are, on the one hand, of letting oneself go, of failing to keep up a common standard that can be instantly seen in the care and attention given to furnishing and its maintenance and cleanliness. On the other hand one should not be seen as the kind of person who has social ambitions that would lead to a distance between that individual and her peers, something which may be betrayed in the purchases she has made or the place she accords certain decorative objects in her home. It is the details - the 'nice' wallpaper, the old kerosene lamp now used for decoration, the Italian reproduction of a crying boy and the dark brown tables that tells visitors this is a friendly, we might appropriately say also 'homely,' couple. A couple who subsequently, as fashions change, keep up with the times but don't try to be any kind of vanguard (1992: 73-5). Renovation itself becomes a way people keep in a kind of tandem with each other. This careful balance that creates the appropriate frame for social interaction applies as much to the activity of keeping home as to the overall appearance. In order not to 'let go' and betray the sense of respectability that they share, an individual must constantly clean, tidy and dust. But it is recognised that this is the means to social intercourse not its replacement. So a person who continues to engage in such activities, who carries on dusting and cleaning when a visitor is present is said to 'have dust on their brains' and could be rebuked on these grounds. So in Kitchen-Table Society we see the activity of home-decoration as a kind of core to living in the modern world.