

The Novel-Reading Panic in 18th-Century in England: An Outline of an Early Moral Media Panic

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SUMMARY

The article explores the unfavourable reaction to the popularisation of novel-reading in 18th-century England in order to show that the outraged opposition to this leisure praxis could be understood in terms of the contemporary sociological concept – ‘moral panic’ – thereby revealing novel-reading as an early version of popular media culture. After outlining the cultural context of 18th-century England as well as the main characteristics of its novels, the paper discerns the anxieties, arising from the passion for fiction, and lays out the argumentation supporting the fear of reading as was advocated by the moral heralds of the time. The analysis reveals that the oppositional reaction to novel-reading indeed encompassed all the key constitutive elements of the proper moral panic phenomenon. Maintaining a dialogue between 18th-century and the present, the essay concludes by drawing analogies with contemporary reactions to television viewing, linking the worried response to the spread of novels with another related notion, the media panic, thus showing that what came to be seen as a feature of the modern (20th and 21st century) mass media culture has in fact a much longer history.

Ključne riječi: moral panic, novels, female readers, 18th-century England, media panic

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Introduction

Women, of every age, of every condition, contract and retain a taste for novels [...T]he depravity is universal. My sight is every-where offended by these foolish, yet dangerous, books. I find them on the toilette of fashion, and in the work-bag of the sempstress; in the hands of the *lady*, who lounges on the sofa, and of the lady, who sits at the counter. From the *mistresses* of nobles they descend to the *mistresses* of snuff-shops – from the *belles* who read them in town, to the chits who spell them in the country. I have actually seen mothers, in miserable garrets, *crying for the imaginary distress of an heroine*, while their children were *crying for bread*: and the mistress of a family losing hours over a novel in the parlour, while her maids, in emulation of the example, were similarly employed in the kitchen. I have seen a scullion-wench with a dishclout in one hand, and a novel in the other, sobbing o'er the sorrows of *Julia*, or a *Jemima*

(*Sylph* no. 5, October 6, 1796: 36-37)¹

In the later half of 18th-century England, evidence of self-indulgent novel-reading on the one hand, and of the outrage it caused on the other was commonplace. This today is well known and much has already been written on the allegedly endangered women-readers, not to mention the sea of studies about the guilty novels themselves.² However, despite the obvious and not entirely unobserved similarities in nowadays reactions towards some of the popular leisure practices – take television viewing or video games or internet – I have not yet come across a study which would seriously consider the trend of novel-reading in 18th-century England as an early example of such anxieties, now commonly labelled as moral panic. My attempt therefore is to explore how and to what extent the anti-novel discourse fits into this fairly modern sociological concept, and vice versa, to verify if the latter can be applied to a historically distant cultural praxis.

The epistemology behind this research follows from my understanding of a novel not as a literary genre, but rather as a 'cultural form' in Raymond Williams' cultural-materialist sense (Williams, 1997), according to which cultural production (in order to be properly understood) can be studied only in relation to its specific societal and historical frameworks, i.e. through the analysis of its production, distribution and consumption processes, as is well presented in the now famous 'book communication circuit' by Robert Darnton, first introduced in 1982 (2006). Examining the social life of a novel as a material cultural practice in terms of Williams' cultural materialism revealed the curiously hostile reaction it received and drew my attention to the comparative contemporary cases and thus towards the

concepts used to study their causes and effects. Here presented evidence of 18th-century novel-reading panic is the result of my research of the related textual material – predominantly 18th-century novels and periodicals. As such, the method employed could be briefly described as historical analysis of the moral panic concept in 18th-century England. It is an approach which entwines a historical-sociological-literary aspect into sociology of the media.

The first section introduces the analytic category of moral panic itself, while the second places it within the historical frame, briefly revealing why I am dealing with this particular period. The third part analyses the reception of novels in the light of the key dimensions that constitute the moral panic phenomenon. Further on, I explore the social and literary effects and consequences of the fear from reading, as well as the reasons behind the conservative reaction. The article concludes by translating the moral into media panic. Taking the reader 250 years backwards, it thus contributes to the often neglected, historical dimension of cultural studies, since it traces some of the central concerns of modern mass media far back in time.

The Concept of Moral Panic

The term ‘moral panic’ was first coined by the British sociologist Jock Young in 1971, when discussing the public concern about the apparently alarming increase in drug abuse,³ but it gained prominence in Stanley Cohen’s monograph on the outrage generated by the 1964 seaside fights between members of rival youth sub-cultures (*Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 1972). Moral panic was described as an episode of intensive, exaggerated concern about a particular issue or perceived threat, which – when empirically assessed – turned out not to be especially damaging.

The concept was quickly adopted by the popular press and for quite a while remained limited to individual, fairly short-lived cases of the so called new social dangers, ranging from ‘video nasties’ and paedophilia to rave and skinhead sub-culture, with no ambition to theoretically elaborate the notion and allow for its specific historical applications. Even when the concept underwent a revival in the 1990s, becoming more thoroughly integrated in sociological epistemology and engaged in dialogue with other related notions (Beck’s risk society and Foucault’s competing discourses), it remained oddly cast in the present. Among the major studies of moral panic,⁴ only Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) include a historical case on medieval witchcraft, but they too are far from attempting any kind of moral panic history. In fact, their understanding of the phenomenon does not much differ from the previous ones, but it at least invites a historical consideration.

Since it also clearly dissects the concept into separate components, making a comparison easier, it is the one most appropriate to adopt for my purposes.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda define five essential elements of moral panic: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality and volatility (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994: 33-49). In short: any moral panic involves a heightened level of concern over the (supposed) behaviour of a certain group or category, and the consequences that this behaviour presumably causes for the rest of society, which is manifested in a number of concrete, tangible ways with media commentary as the most general one. Perceived as harmful and threatening, the alleged culprit often incites hostile stereotyping, which is encouraged by a strong sense of consensus in the society about the menace being serious, and the fear and animosity justified. The most conspicuous feature and defining characteristic of moral panic is that the concern grows grossly out of proportion. Moreover, because moral panic tends to be volatile, the conspicuous feature and defining characteristics are usually fairly limited temporally. However, as an abstract formula, this model represents rather an ideal type in Max Weber's sense, which means it should be used as "a yardstick against which to measure actual examples" (Cricher, 2003: 3); something asserted by Goode and Ben-Yehuda themselves, when pointing out that moral panics very much vary and "come in different sizes" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994: 34). By trying to identify these five components in the context of 18th-century reaction to novel-reading – which is, surprisingly, mentioned nowhere in any of the above studies – I will attempt to re-evaluate moral panic as historically relevant label.⁵

Historical Contextualisation

Before plunging in the topic, the general socio-historical circumstances of 18th-century England as well as the key characteristics of the novels of the time need to be outlined, if only roughly. An answer to why I am dealing with this exact period is simple and straightforward: it was in 18th-century England that (novel-)reading first became a popular leisure praxis. A few facts will help explain, why this is so. For reading to have been able to establish itself as a popular pleasure, some basic social conditions needed to be met: first, a certain level of literacy, allowing for a sufficient reading potential; second: a fairly developed book market with a well functioning production and distribution net, enabling people an access to books (physically as well as financially); leisure; and last but not least: some level of privacy – which was just as essential for novel-reading as the rest.

All this was possible only in a favourable religious and political atmosphere. England was a protestant country with a strong puritan influence, which encouraged individual reading of the Bible in the vernacular, and therefore explicitly

promoted literacy. More crucially, it was also the first to establish parliamentarism, functioning as a parliamentary monarchy ever since the end of 17th century. This had important implications: assuming participation of a wider society in the state decision-making, it stressed the significance of public debate and consequently stimulated news culture. Newspapers and periodicals in England had flourished since the Civil War (1642-1651), increasing the numbers of the reading public as well as strengthening secularism – the two effects being obviously connected.

Early commercialisation is yet another thing that cannot go unmentioned. England developed the first capitalist economy: it was the first country of industrial and, correspondingly, commercial revolution, which not only provided a solid basis for publishing business, but had profound social effects. By separating home from work, sending men to the factories and confining women to their houses, it differentiated the public from the private, allowing for the concept of privacy to become distinguished spatially as well as psychologically; and to be recognized as a value. There is a reason why England is said to represent “a cradle of privacy” (Ariès, 1986), fulfilling yet another important condition for the development of leisure reading. The latter also determines the predominant reading public: those staying in the privacy of their homes were women.⁶

All the above-listed factors and processes coincide in 18th-century England, ‘producing’ in its second half enough of the literate, the leisurous and the well-off to amount to a considerable novel-reading public.

In many ways the novel can be described as a cultural expression of these changes, i.e. the cultural form of the period, catching the ‘structure of feeling’ in Raymond Williams’ term (1977).

Without simplifying too much, one could state 18th-century English novels⁷ were similar to a general (traditional and unspecific) notion we now hold of a novel, a genre notorious for being impossible to define even though we all know what it is when referring to it. This is not surprising given that this was also the period which recognized the novel as a proper literary genre, albeit it was not yet highly esteemed. The following brief account of its main characteristics provides some answers to why this was so.

In contrast with lengthy heroic romances which narrated in an exalted poetic language the fatal deeds of aristocratic heroes fighting for ‘the big cause’ in faraway historical settings, the novels – in short – represented fictionalized reality, an image of everyday life of the ordinary people. Instead of traditional epic plots, abstract universality and stylized (either good or bad) characters, they introduced in simple colloquial prose middle and even lower class heroes, placed in contemporary context, thus founding their poetics on credibility and realism in content, yet

more in form. The genre obviously borrowed from many other literary forms; fictional and non-fictional, public and personal: i.e. from conduct books and religious tracts, philosophical essays and periodicals, diaries, poetry, science and history books, resulting in quite a hybrid, eclectic form.

Importantly new was its dealing with the inner life and the individual psychology, creating a bond of intimacy between a reader and a hero as well as the reader and the author, which enabled the process of identification. The latter was facilitated by setting the stories in a familiar context and by using contemporary references to the well known figures of the time (politicians, writers, actors etc.), as well as to the famous venues and events. In short, the author, the hero and the reader shared the same 'world'.

The plot put forward the micro-image of life, but always attached it to the 'big issues' of morale and virtue, often with an explicit didactic component. It has to be said though that what was moral was not always agreed upon, and the heroes regularly strayed away from 'the right path' only to find it again in the end. This was among others one of the sources of criticism, although it was usually tolerated in the name of the authors' duty to at once teach and amuse.⁸

If I wanted to briefly sketch a typical 18th-century English novel, I would say, grossly simplifying, that there were perhaps two main types: they both focused on the individual, but one was written in the first person narrative, usually in the form of a diary or letters; while the other used the third person narrator and sent the hero wandering around the world, where he had to live through different, more or less adventurous episodes in a picaresque-like style. If the latter type of novel-writing allowed for a more vulgar poetics and chose predominantly male main characters, the diary and epistolary novels rather functioned as sentimental confessions of the *heroine*'s emotions.

A characteristic plot featured an unhappy love affair between a lower-class virtuous beauty and a gentleman, both in love with each other, but unable to unite due to severe social constraints. When there seems to be no solution for the two and both are on the brinks of marrying somebody else, a sudden revelation puts everything in order: it turns out that as a baby the heroine was swapped by a nurse and is in fact of a noble birth, a daughter of some lord, which makes it possible for the happy couple to marry. One cannot claim the plots of nowadays romances and soap operas are much different. Using a similar pattern, they on the one side provide the topics of universal relevance, such as love and family relations and average everyday problems, enabling and inviting identification, while on the other, they supply constant emotional drama, extraordinary beauty and exciting adventure, thus carefully maintaining the gap between the world of the reader/viewer

and the media reality, leaving the yearning audience eagerly awaiting another dose of escapist gratification.

Fear from Novel-Reading in 18th-Century England

It is not hard to understand that the novels as described were accessible literally to everybody at least vaguely literate. This was something the publishers and booksellers took good advantage of and on that basis novel-reading soon became a popular form of leisure and pleasure, the kind that could be easily compared to watching a television serial. Even so, an important distinction should not be overlooked: in comparison to the television, which quickly became a commodity that everybody could and did afford, books remained unavailable to a substantial part of society throughout the 18th century – something that might account for the difference in the intensity of the two moral panic reactions.

It is safe to say that once the novels came to represent a significant share in the literary market – a trend which started with an unprecedented success of Richardson's *Pamela*⁹ and gained swing in the last third of the century¹⁰ – critique, opposition, and aversion became the most pronounced and distinctive responses to novel-reading in 18th-century England.

Concern. Arguments *against* were numerous and they varied according to who they were addressed to and, cunningly, often even which novel they referred to, but what they all had in common revealed one and the same fear about the generally corruptive effects of novel-reading. Broadly, one could divide the reproaches into those ascribing to novels the dangerous psychological affects, triggering imitation and inoculating wrong ideas of love and life; and into those referring to the mere habit of novel-reading as a physically harmful waste of time, damaging not only the mind and the morale of readers, but also their eyesight and posture.

When contextualized, this concern is somewhat easier to understand. The novel was the first literary genre that “came into existence as a commodity” (Lovell, 1987: 28). As a newcomer in the literary field, without any respectable predecessors to rely on, it evoked suspicions in itself. Written in simple, accessible prose, it was easily understood even to the non-educated, which did not exactly add to its respectability, but rather provoked rebuke. The “unparallel fecundity of authors” (More, 1799) was seen to support the view that: “[e]very love-stricken swain and every melting nymph is qualified to write a love-story which shall pass for a pretty novel; at least with the help of a friend, to spell it and put it together”¹¹. The impression was strengthened by another defining characteristic: novels dealt with the everyday life, they focused on love and family relations and on individual

quest for happiness; all of which was something everyone was an expert on, which made them generally accessible on the level of content as well. But then these plots also necessarily escaped real life, presenting it as full of adventures, emotional shifts and interesting characters. The approachable realist narrative, confidential first person address, a probable, albeit fictionalized (dramatized and emotionalized) storyline, set in a familiar context with predominantly happy endings – this altogether was exactly what was seen as dangerously serving as a possible alternative life-scenario. A credible description of an implausible sequel of events was perceived as a risky trap.¹² Add to this that by the last third of the century, novels in one form or the other (either in pirate editions, borrowed from a circulating library, serialized or bought in chap-books) financially also came within easy reach of almost everybody above the lower class, and the circumstances are ripe for a catastrophe! All you need are naïve, inexperienced, susceptible readers – “the young, the ignorant and the idle” (Johnson, 1750) – to jump at the bait. Considering that the novel-reading public was regarded as predominantly female and that women were already perceived as in all respects weaker, fanciful, more sensitive and thus more liable to bad influence, the situation seemed all the more alarming.¹³

The contemporary press abounded in carefully detailed cases of young women, whom such reading has deluded. An article in *The Weekly Magazine* in November 1771 reports how “the lovely Flavia forsook her faithful lover and ended up in London in a tawdry silk gown and petticoat, with a meagre countenance” (in Taylor, 1943: 78). Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu blamed novels for the love entanglements of her acquaintance Miss Hunter, who ran away to Holland with the married Earl of Pembroke (see Blunt, 1923). Even readers following examples from the allegedly acceptable fiction, written by such moral paragons as ‘master’ Richardson himself, had fallen into difficulties.¹⁴

Novels were accused of creating expectations which life could not fulfil, and of wearying the sympathies and producing callousness by constantly exposing the reader to scenes of exciting pathos (Williams, 1970: 13-15).¹⁵ When all the rest failed, laying blame on them for distracting readers from the more useful work, and attributing to them the power of a drug, was always at hand.¹⁶ The novel did not stand a chance – it was necessarily guilty of something.

Hostility. Many of the above reproaches already border on hostility, but the (often self-proclaimed) moral heralds could do much worse. It has already become clear that the main targets of ‘the attack’ were novels and the novel-writers, but the accusations were just as much directed to novel-readers, as to the whole growing apparatus of the literary market with its distribution channels which facilitated the

access to perilous books. The enemy had many faces and this made the threat even more pronounced; or, in sociological terminology of moral panic, it “amplified the public anxiety” (Thompson, 1998: 11).

The literary reviews, at the time still suspended between ethic and aesthetic, probably account for the most hostile attitude towards novelists. Often they were ruthlessly offensive. Not uncommon were judgements such as: “obscene and silly”, “execrable stuff”, or “amorous nonsense” (*Monthly Review*, October 1760, no. xxii; March 1755, no. xii; November 1759, no. xxi, in Taylor, 1943: 96). After a few more examples, you are quickly convinced that this was not just criticism of individual titles, but the general attitude towards the genre: “What we have said of the generality of our Novels, for these fifteen years past, will serve for this one. It is just as pert, as dull, and as lewd as the rest of the tribe” (*Monthly*, May 1765, no. xxxii, in Taylor, 1943: 96). The response to an anonymous novel, unhappily entitled *Twas Wrong to Marry Him* (1773), simply read: *Twas Wrong to Write It* (*Monthly*, April 1773, no. xlvi in Tompkins, 1932: 49).

Circulating libraries, predominantly associated with novels, were compared to brothels (Colman in *Polly Honeycombe*, 1760) and gin-shops (Pearson, 1999: 164); whilst readers aroused a whole flood of reproofs on their own account. Their regard for such low literature was seen to reflect their own bad taste and dubious personal traits: they were said to be fanciful and superficial, indolent and hasty, incapable of any serious study whatsoever. They were believed to be reading only for the plot, skipping chapters, rushing to the end only to be able to immerse in a new story. Negligence and carelessness were particularly commonly associated with the readers of novels. They were accused of making excessive notations and filling pages with sentimental outbursts (Jackson, 2001). With a narrative easy to follow and in a convenient duodecimo size (cca. 12 x 19 cm), novels were read everywhere and frequently also literally ‘on the way’ or in the midst of doing something else: at the hairdresser’s, while travelling in a coach, at meals, while putting on makeup – which all contributed to novel-reading being slandered as almost something indecent and slothful: “My books come home so powdered, so pomaded, so perfumed”, exclaims the circulating library proprietor in *Family Secrets* (Pratt, 1797: 388). In addition, reading in bed by the candlelight was believed to risk conflagration, while women laughing out loud over a certain scene or wobbling in emotions over another, in indecent body postures, regularly incited an offensive language, resulting in a heavily stigmatized and stereotyped image of a female novel-reader¹⁷ – a precursor of a modern couch potato.

The reading sofa and the television couch certainly represent what 18th-century novel-reading and modern-day television-viewing seem to have in common. Analogies offer themselves as on an assembly-line and they all seem to support

the concept of moral (and) media panic. The reading sofa and the television couch both invoke the feeling of leisure, as though idleness and the 'waste-of-time' were written in the furniture. The suggestive contours of the sofa almost prescribe the user's pose, inviting a certain body language, making the lewd connotations almost impossible to ignore. "Novel reading [...] seems literally to affect the backbone; the posture of the novel reader is rarely upright; [it is] associated with sofa and softness; it is supine, erotic, luxurious" (Ferris, 1991: 39-40). It is true that the television couch is regarded as more gender-neutral, more collective in use and thus less eroticised, but then the two also share a number of other implications; from those connected to 'health and beauty' issues – lousy posture; fat, weak and limp bodies and bad sight – to the stigma of slovenliness. If novel-readers were seen as smearing books with candle-wax and causing fire, television viewers are associated with eating junk-food and spilling ketchup on the carpet. Not only did novel-reading in 18th-century England induce moral panic; it also revealed the anxieties that are still with us today.

Consensus. The various sources of the above examples already give a sense that the fear from novel-reading was a widespread and agreed upon sentiment. Evidence range from magazine and newspaper commentaries to literary reviews; from private letters to fiction itself, and there are also conduct books, moral-religious essays, educational treatises, guidebooks, diaries, as well as the more ephemeral material, such as book advertisements or library catalogues (both often openly addressing the problematic), all of which sufficiently 'adopted' the role of modern mass media in 'bringing out' the problem.

The way the alleged victims as well as the suspected culprits responded to the situation could also be read as a proof of consensus on the topic, and the similar manner in which authors and readers alike actively shunned the term 'novel' itself was no doubt a result of a certain 'campaign' against the genre and the stigma that stuck to novel-readers. The same strategies the latter used in disguising their reading habits – hiding the novels away, reading them under false covers or explicitly denying the act at all – all this is a sign of consent, of the recognition of the anxiety, too.¹⁸

Disproportionality. In the absence of facts and figures one could simply say that what best demonstrates that the 18th-century anxiety about novel-reading was truly exaggerated is that its pernicious effects were never proved, nor any big disaster ever happened on that account, even after the number of novels, novel-readers and the whole literary network had risen considerably. If the manipulative potential of novels were in reality that great, women would be eloping in hordes. The fear

certainly grew out of proportion, which is exactly what lies at the core of the moral panic effect. The belief, fed by the imaginary and artificially agitated threat, persisted despite the lack of proof. It is indeed easy to retrospectively see a situation as overdramatized, but moral panic is in itself a retrospectively recognized phenomenon and it is thus relevant to say that we now know novels at least generally do not have the power to addict and corrupt. The following examples of serious suggestions to restrict novel-reading confirm its influence was grossly overrated. In a letter, dated November 7 1789, and addressed to the editor of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Mr. Urban, a certain R.R.E. reflects:

Novels have been long and frequently regarded not as being merely useless to society, but even as pernicious, from the very indifferent morality, and ridiculous way of thinking, which they almost generally inculcate. Why then, in the name of the common sense, should such an useless and pernicious commodity, with which we are over-run, go duty-free, while the really useful necessary of life is taxed to the utmost extent? A tax on books of this description only (for books of real utility should ever be circulated free as air) would bring in a very considerable sum for the service of Government, without being levied on the poor or the industrious.

(December 1789, vol. LVII: 1048-1049)

A renowned English essayist, Vicesimus Knox, seems to have had something similar in mind already a decade earlier. In the essay *On Novel-Reading* he writes:

If, however, Novels are to be prohibited, in what, it will be asked, can the young mind employ itself during the hours of necessary leisure? To this it may be answered, that when the sweetened poison is removed, plain and wholesome food will always be relished. The growing mind will crave nourishment, and will gladly seek it in true histories, written in a pleasing and easy style, on purpose for its use.

(Knox, *Essays Moral and Literary*, 1778, no. XIV: 304)

These two 18th-century examples come closest to the debates about introducing legal sanctions, which commonly accompany modern examples of moral panic. Regardless of the fact that nothing ever came out of such proposals, although they were not at all that rare, this clearly shows what significance was ascribed to novels. Indeed, one could claim that endeavours to thwart their spread and restrain novel-reading resulted not only in turning the novel into the more appealing forbidden fruit, but – paradoxically – by making it a recurrent topic of conversation,

assigned it an immense importance and thus indirectly legitimated and strengthened its position as a literary, cultural and social form.

Volatility. The time frame of the 18th-century novel-opposition is considerably vague. I have been referring to the later half, with a stress on the last third of the century, but indeed the anti-novel discourse can be traced further back and it certainly exceeds the 18th century at least for two decades.¹⁹ T. Lovell (1987) locates it in the period from 1770 to 1820; J.T. Taylor (1943) extends it from 1760 to 1830; and J. Pearson (1999) even to 1750-1835. None of them explains why exactly they have chosen these dates, and it seems the intervals only designate the time scale of the evidence they refer to. The fact that they overlap considerably, however, undoubtedly suggests that this is the period of intensified anti-novel discourse; the time when those who opposed fiction-reading already before, raised a hue and cry upon its rapid rise, while many others, only just acknowledging the change, often simply joined in the chorus. One may speculate that the beginning years of the above outlined time-spans refer to the post-Richardson flow of sentimental novels, with many of them obviously deviating from the moral model of a novel as pleasing instruction offering an ideal version of the world as set by a literary giant Samuel Johnson (*The Rambler* no. 4, 1750), while the end-years possibly designate the acceptance and legitimisation of the novel as a genre.²⁰ This is significant in itself, since it evidently shows that there is no special event indicating the beginning or the closure of the anti-novel 'campaign', and indeed – according to all what has already been said – anything of the sort could hardly be expected. In fact, one can still find examples of novel-reading panic today.²¹

As such, 'the case' here presented does not appear exactly volatile. Reaction to the spreading popularity of novel-reading could hardly be described as an intensive outburst, and it certainly did not subside quickly – something which is characteristic of modern moral panics. However, this does not prevent it from being conceptualized as (a type of) one. While acknowledging that the moral panic fever-pitch is usually fairly limited temporally, Goode and Ben-Yehuda nevertheless explicitly stress that "moral panic may be sustained over long periods of time" and may even become some kind of a routine (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994a: 158), thus allowing for much more flexibility of the concept, which corresponds with their historical consideration of the long-lasting witch-craze.²² One could in fact not impose a temporal limitation on the television moral panic either. The longevity of the two, although allowing for individual outbursts, seems to call for a reconsideration of the terminology. With novel-reading and television viewing it would perhaps be more accurate to talk about 'moral concern' – a suggestion which needs further elaboration elsewhere. As it is, and after tracing the five de-

fining criteria of the concept put forward by Goode and Ben-Yehuda, it could nevertheless be positively asserted that, with or without the definite peak, the 18th-century opposition to novel-reading can certainly be justified as a historical example of moral panic.

What is more – given the increasing criticism of the moral panic concept, pointing out that the media appear to be perceiving (if not themselves creating) moral panics all the time (McRobbie, 1994) and thus certainly before they can at all be properly assessed – such historical consideration of the reaction provides a much more accurate way to analyse its effects and consequences. With some critics even calling for a discussion on ‘research panic’, i.e. on scholars’ exaggerated response over certain popular reactions, here presented approach may offer some useful insights into how to tackle this often slippery phenomenon.

Effects and Consequences

The benefits of applying a modern concept to a historically distant period and of using sociological terms in a predominantly literary field of research, lie, at least partly, in the way doing so opens up new reflections, simply by enabling us to see and understand things in a new light. Moral panic thus partly serves as a heuristic device: as a means, and not merely an end. As asserted by Critcher, “its usefulness lies as much in what it did not reveal about a given example as in what it did” (Critcher, 2003: 2). Upon a closer look, it can be seen that Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s model indeed reveals a lot of elements that – upon applying the scheme to a concrete case – turn out to be missing. Who, for instance, were the moral heralds here? Who were the victims if not the seduced readers – the culprits – themselves? And what were the effects?²³ The search for the answers already shatters a seemingly well-ordered and unanimous picture and reveals an orchestra of different voices, coming from various directions, a whole ‘bakhtinian heteroglossia’.

To begin with a common example: James Fordyce in his *Sermons to Young Women* (1765) viciously spits upon novels, but he carefully singles out Richardson’s moral prose (explicitly his second novel, *Clarissa*), as well as the work of a pious poet and a novelist Elizabeth Rowe (see Sermon V). Far from condemning a ‘Learned Lady’ in general, he is careful to emphasize the beneficial affects of reading history, travel writing, poetry and moral philosophy (Sermon VII). V. Knox (1778) warns against *Pamela* and *Tom Jones*, but approves of *Robinson Crusoe*. Some, however, would prevent women from learning to read at all! The father of the novelist and playwright Frances Sheridan was certainly not the only one. Others thought a novel or two was occasionally acceptable, but were unambi-

guous in loathing chain-reading. Methodists encouraged selected reading, but they too warned against time-trapping novels.

The “conservative reaction to the novel”, as Williams (1970: 13) phrases what I have here tagged moral panic, was far from limited to conservative circles. ‘The novel’ was not a stable term yet; it appeared under various labels, and in the process of establishing it as a genre, novelists themselves were often the ones who took advantage of moral panic discourse in order to attack a competing ‘school’ of fiction-writing. The number of novels featuring problematic reading – the famed Charlotte Lennox’s *Female Quixote* (1752) being just one among the many – can be taken as another evidence of the strength of the opposition, but it also says something about the authors’ inventiveness and adaptability to turn hostile conditions into their own advantage and write novels about how *not* to read novels.²⁴

The ‘pretence’ is in fact what appears to be a common way of dealing with this particular moral panic. People did not stop reading novels. Nor did moral panic in any way weaken novel-writing or the distribution of novels – just as, two centuries later, it did not prevent people from watching television. On the contrary, the success of the genre and the campaign against it run parallel. And readers seem to have gone along with it. With so much evidence of the spreading novel-reading on the one hand and of the alarmed admonishments against it on the other, one can only conclude that the former did not exclude the latter. We are not dealing simply with a hypocritical denial of what one says *versus* what one does. People genuinely believed that novels were harmful, but they were at once convinced that they themselves could not be affected. Or they just did not apply the threat to their own individual readings. It was (is!) the same with watching television. Besides, the sceptical attitude towards the novel was regarded as something you were – at least in certain circles – expected to agree with, a *noblesse oblige* sort of thing; but that did not necessarily mean you were personally of the same opinion.

The moral panic herald was thus not a one-headed Anthony Absolute from R.B. Sheridan’s (i.e. Frances’ Sheridan’s son) *The Rivals* (1774), comparing circulating libraries to the “evergreen tree of the diabolical knowledge” (Sheridan, 2004: 61). He came with many heads and even though they all shared the same anxiety, they saw the threat differently and therefore reacted differently. Georgian novel-reading panic was not an organized movement; its discourse was in itself fragmented and differentiated and it was reflected in myriad of ways, variously packaged and appropriated according to different contexts, so that, retrospectively, one quickly develops a sense of its ubiquitous presence. Multiple versions notwithstanding, one needs to keep in mind that moral panic always stands just for one among the many discourses, and is not necessarily the dominant one, although it does make

sure that it is 'heard.' In 18th-century England it coexisted with other localized reactions to the burgeoning novel-culture, but these were much less pronounced.²⁵

Novel-Reading Panic as a Symptom

In his study *Policing the Crisis* (1978), Stuart Hall importantly underlined the background implications of moral panic, suggesting that the latter provided an efficient strategy for diverting public attention from the more complex and topical problems of the state and society. One does not need to go that far to assert that the novel-reading panic of late 18th-century England did not arise out of nowhere. It was related to pre-existing anxieties and broader social fears. The above account shows that the problem was not simply in novels as such. They were recognized as a threat only after a number of other factors stepped in; after "they had sprung like mushrooms" (Reeve, 1785, part II: 7), and after they had become easily accessible and so much loved by the audience. It was the popularisation, the commercialisation, and the commodification of novels that caused so much disquiet. The fact that the moral party picked on the contents was only part of the response to the situation, albeit the most conspicuous one, and I believe that the 'problematic' contents in itself would not have induced the moral panic. The 18th-century novel-related scare has to be understood as a reaction to the combination of circumstances.

First it was the growth of the reading public and accessibility of literature in general, which caused concern, lest the poor, the subordinated and the oppressed, through books, gained awareness of their unjust conditions and turned dissatisfied, consequently endeavouring to change things and thus endangering the status quo. The novel as an all-inclusive, all-accessible, and all-concerning – i.e. inherently very democratic form – was seen as especially threatening in this respect – the more so as large scale social changes, notably rapid commercialisation and accelerated vertical mobility, were already successfully blurring the once much more discernable social map. The increasingly secular understanding of the world and the enhanced individualism, allegedly promoted by the novel, did not help the matters either. As a result, the school system, especially female boarding schools, was blamed for encouraging the taste for novels instead of suppressing it. All this was linked with the changing role of women in general – especially since novels were seen as becoming increasingly feminised, being not only read but also widely written by women, not to mention the number of heroines they featured. Further on, the concern corresponded with changed relations between the private and the public, and with the romantic reconceptualization of love and marriage (i.e. the

family and the inheritance policy) – all that was again accompanied by a level of uneasiness.

The novel could thus readily be seen as associated with, even as embodying the many novelties, the uncanny unknown, which is why I believe the 18th-century aversion to novel-reading needs to be understood as reflecting suspicion and discomfort about wider social transformations. Novels were blamed for a motley range of evil, as summarized by Knox: “If it be true that the present age is more corrupt than the preceding, the great multiplication of novels has probably contributed to its degeneracy” (Knox, 1778 in I. Williams, 1970: 304). These were obviously the concerns of those who had the means and the power to express them – namely, the upper rank of the society. However, once the culprit was located, once the threat was articulated, it was easy to appropriate it according to one’s own ‘needs’, which is exactly why there are versions of the moral panic rhetoric. Besides, it was much easier to fight a concrete novel than the big abstract social problems ‘out-there’.

Conclusion: Media Panic?

These anxieties ring a bell. They could be in many ways and without much ado translated into contemporary lamentations about, for example, the perils of (watching) television, or rather, certain television genres, e.g. soap operas, or – for that matter – of playing video games. Recently, Radio 4’s programme has taken a look at how Parliament and the media have demonised computer games by examining the scandal which surrounded the early English novels, which were though perilous for their hyper-realistic world that was dangerously blurring the line between reality and fiction (BBC 4, *The Long View*, 9 January 2007). There are indeed many similarities in the way the reader and the viewer is absorbed in the story; in the way (s)he is invited to identify with the author or the characters; in how what is read or seen functions as a sort of source-field of daydreaming; and last but not least: in the sustained, long-term anxieties the different media evoke(d). I cannot at this stage go further into tracing the many parallels between the two historically distant leisure practices, but the association is enough to make one aware of how much the specificity of novel as a medium itself contributed to the anxious response.

In the 18th century, novels were (already) predominantly read alone and in silence; thus stories were (re)played in readers’ own heads, with no intermediaries censoring the potentially damaging chapters.²⁶ The interpretation of what is read thus escapes all control which only makes the presumably manipulative power of the novel seem more effective.²⁷ Locating the source of the anxiety in the specific

conditions of the intimate reading act itself allows us to regard the anti-novel reaction as not only the moral, but in fact the *media* panic,²⁸ thereby opening yet another way into thinking about the role of the novels of the time, which were indeed much more comparable to the role of today's media than to today's novels.

The article thus shows not only that the opposition to novels and novel-reading in 18th-century England could be understood in terms of moral and media panic, but also that structurally moral panic today functions very much as it did 250 years ago, making us aware of the historical dimension of the media-related phenomenon often typically taken to be born with TV-culture. Hence, it helps us better understand media culture in general.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ When citing from 18th-century sources, I have throughout preserved the original spelling and punctuation, or – when the original was not available – the form in which it appears in secondary literature.
- ² Among others, see: J. Pearson: *Women's Reading in Britain* (1999); K. Flint: *The Woman Reader* (1995); K. Shevelov: *Women and Print Culture* (1989); D. Varma: *The Evergreen Tree of Diabolical Knowledge* (1972); J.T. Taylor: *Early Opposition to the English Novel* (1943).
- ³ J. Young: "The role of the police as amplifiers of deviance." In: *Images of Deviance*, ed. S. Cohen (1971).
- ⁴ P. Jenkins: *Intimate Enemies* (1992); E. Goode, N. Ben-Yehuda: *Moral Panics* (1994); K. Thompson: *Moral Panics* (1998); C. Critcher: *Moral Panics and the Media* (2003). The term 'moral panics' is used either as a noun in plural, implying the multiple number of cases, or as a phrase (noun + verb). Focusing only on one 'case', I will stick to the singular noun.
- ⁵ It seems that in the 18th century there was no established expression for the fear from novels. My use of the term moral panic is obviously retrospective, although the concern over this "dangerous recreation" (Beattie, 1783 in Williams 1970: 327) is more often tagged as "oppositional reaction" (Taylor, 1943) or "anti-novel discourse" (Warner, 1998). I could find only one example which explicitly labels it as moral panic. In *Consuming Fiction* Terry Lovell asserts: "The moral panic [the novel] occasioned in the last quarter of the 18th century was merely the first of a series which occurred whenever a new cultural commodity made its debut" (Lovell, 1987: 8). She does not, however, elaborate on the comparison.
- ⁶ This certainly did not apply to all women, but it held true for most of those who could afford to read books, i.e. the gentry and the upper middle class. The middle class was also the one most affected by the industrial revolution, since the wives of the poor needed to remain working while those belonging to the aristocracy never worked anyway.
- ⁷ The now most famous titles of the time include Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767).
- ⁸ For a more detailed general description of the early English novel, see J.P. Hunter, 1990 (et al.).
- ⁹ Allegedly the first English bestseller, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) is a story of a virtuous young servant Pamela who succeeds in defending her chastity from the seducing attempts of her master only to in the end win not merely his lust, but also his heart and respect. In the meantime she falls in love with him herself and so they are in the end happily married.
- ¹⁰ The decade between 1770 and 1779 brought 315, the next one 405 and the last 701 new novels (in Britain and Ireland). Compare this to the previous decades: the number of published novels jumped from 95 in 1730s to 210 in 1740s. 1750s saw 238 new titles and 1760s 292 (see Raven in Raven, Schöwerling,

Garside, 2000: 26). These figures indeed conceal individual years of decline, notably in the late 1770s, but the general trend clearly shows a steady increase of the output.

- ¹¹ The quote was published in one of the first literary reviews ever, *The Monthly Review*, in April 1775 (in Taylor, 1943: 18).
- ¹² Clara Reeve neatly captures this aspect of the novel: “The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times it was written. [...] [It] gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it is to represent every scene in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joys or distresses, of the persons in the story, as if they were our own” (Reeve, 1785, vol. I: 111). It has to be made clear that many reproaches could be and indeed were applied to prose fiction in general, romances included, and there certainly were voices against reading fiction long before the rise of the novel (especially as the term itself was wobbling for quite some time), but it was its probability and credibility that in many ways contributed to its being perceived as ‘detrimental’. That also explains the ensuing tendency to look back with nostalgia to the less probable and thus less dangerous heroic romance.
- ¹³ Even though the predominantly female readership is still taken as common knowledge there is in fact little direct proof for this to be truly the case. The assumptions based on circumstantial evidence are certainly convincing, but the majority of critics took it for granted without arguing, which makes it necessary to re-launch the debate, especially as new databases, notably *The Reading Experience Database 1450-1945*, promise to offer relevant material to be checked against the established belief. Having said that, I nevertheless think women will prove to have been the principle novel-readers, but perhaps to a lesser extent than it was previously believed.
- ¹⁴ An account ‘On Novels’ in *The Female Mentor* (1793) concerns a sensible lady who after having read Richardson’s *Charles Grandison* (a portrait of a supernaturally virtuous male) in her youth expected to find in her real adult life a lover of a comparable quality. Disappointed, she refused one offer of marriage after another and thus continued to live upon her romantic notions until it was too late.
- ¹⁵ A contributor to *The Critical Review* (October 1765, no. xx) complains: “From the usual strain of these compositions, one would be apt to conclude that love is not only the principal, but almost the sole passion that actuates the human heart. The youth of both sexes are thereby rendered liable to the grossest illusions. They fondly imagine that every thing must yield to the irresistible influence of all conquering love: but upon mixing with the world, they find, to their cost, that they have been miserably deceived; that they have viewed human nature through a false medium” (in Taylor, 1943: 66).
- ¹⁶ The drug metaphor recurs with television: in 1955 *Coronet* magazine published a ‘confession of a TV addict’, entitled: »I was cured of TV, the story of a confirmed addict and his long, hard fight back to life« (in Tichi, 1991: 177).
- ¹⁷ The following quote nicely exemplifies how women could become so engaged in a story they were not able even to stir from the book. In December 1782 Charlotte Burney writes to her sister, a successful novelist Fanny Burney, about the reception of her latest work, *Cecilia*: “I called on Miss Reynolds yesterday & she had just finished *Cecilia*; she says it has almost killed her, for that she was so eager & interested that she sat up so late at nights & cried so much she is almost blind & besides, she added, I was so tied down to it, I couldn’t bring myself even to go to a certain place when I wanted” (in Crump, 2002: 223; see also 224-226).
- ¹⁸ Fictional and non-fictional accounts again abound with examples. In a letter to her father, dated 15 July 1795, Fanny Burney explains: “[...] I must now answer your queries about my Work itself. It is to all intents & purposes a Novel, but I annex so merely to that title, in a general sense, a staring Love story, that I hate so to call it” (in Crump, 2002: 281). Accordingly, she rather subtitled *Camilla* with ‘Sketches of characters and moral, put in action’. In the prefix to *The Works of Tobias Smollett* (1797) dr. John Moore observes a similar trend among readers: “There were for a considerable time so many [abominable] novels that the very word Novel conveyed the idea of a frivolous or pernicious book. Even this, however, did not diminish the number, though it made many people at pains to declare that for their part

they never read novels; a declaration sometimes made by persons of both sexes, who never read anything else” (Moore, 1797: xci-xcii).

- ¹⁹ Because of my primary interest in the 18th century, I have been throughout focusing on the early period of the opposition to novel.
- ²⁰ According to J. Richetti (et al.), the novel “did not actually solidify [...] in the English-speaking world until the beginning of the 19th century, when with Jane Austen and Walter Scott the novel in our current sense became widely accepted in Britain as a major literary form” (Richetti, 1996: 1).
- ²¹ E.g. the outraged reaction to B.E. Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991), or, more recently, some of the responses to the *Harry Potter* novels. In Slovenia there was some evident discontent with the choice of Zupan’s *Menuet za kitaro* as a topic of the grammar school graduation essay.
- ²² For being able to determine the peak of the 18th-century anti-novel sentiment I would need to gather much more evidence and carefully peruse the dates of individual examples – something that exceeds the scope of this essay. But from what I have read so far, I dare to suggest that late 1790s stand out for the intensity of the response, not least because of the new considerable increase in the number of published novels (in Britain and Ireland) in 1796: from 50 in 1795 to 91 in the next year, followed by 75 in 1798 and 99 in 1799 (Raven in Raven, Schöwerling, Garside, 2000: 26).
- ²³ In their book the term victim and victimization is mentioned only eight times, while the question of effects is almost entirely ignored.
- ²⁴ Significantly, novels themselves offer little favourable descriptions of self-indulgent novel-readers, which would be devoid of reproachful implications, or would even celebrate and legitimize the pleasure of reading.
- ²⁵ Open defences of the novel or novel-reading are indeed hard to find. One of them is James Sand’s *The General Defence of Modern Novels* (1802), who obviously felt the novel-reading outrage was ridiculously exaggerated: “To all those who charged novel-writers with representing Love as uncontrollable, omnipotent, and everlasting, to the incalculable detriment of society [I answer] let the facts speak for themselves” (in Taylor, 1943: 67). The celebration of reading by J. Lackington, the bookseller, from the 1790s might also count in: “All ranks and degrees now READ. [...] the poorer sort of farmers, and even the poor country people in general [...] you may see *Tom Jones*, *Roderick Random*, and other entertaining books, stuck up on their bacon-rags [...]” (in Altick, 1957: 39).
- ²⁶ On the contrary, theatrical shows which evoked moral panic even before the novel, were regularly censored – in 1737 Licensing Act even prohibited the performances of all but the two biggest (and closely surveyed) national theatres. One, however, cannot censure the show a novel triggers in reader’s head.
- ²⁷ An extract from J. Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1765) vividly captures this idea: “[...] there seem to me to be very few, in the style of Novel, that you can read with safety, and yet fewer that you can read with advantage – What shall we say of certain books, which we are assured (for we have not read them) are in their nature so shameful, in their tendency so pestiferous, and which contain such rank treason against the royalty of virtue, such horrible violation of all decorum, that she, who can bear to peruse them must in her soul be a prostitute, let her reputation in life be what it will. But can it be true – say you chaste stars [...] – can it be true, that any young woman, pretending to decency, should endure for a moment to look on this internal brood of futility and lewdness?” (Sermon IV).
- ²⁸ Although some scholars tend to differentiate between the two (Drotner and Biltereyst, 2002), media panic is usually defined as a type of moral panic, which appears in connection with the new communication commodities, notably the television, video-games and the Internet, and more precisely, with certain programs. The two contested areas are primarily the (mis)representation of sex and violence, with the children and the young regarded as the main victims. However, I believe the role of the media in the two ‘panics’ is importantly different: while media panic refers to the case when the medium itself is causing concern with its characteristics (i.e. the way it is used, its effects etc.), the media is on the other hand inevitably also one of the crucial actors if not preconditions of every moral panic (see McRobbie, 1995).

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Panika oko čitanja romana u 18 st. u Engleskoj: Prikaz rane moralne medijske panike

Ana Vogrinčič

SAŽETAK

U ovom se članku proučava negativna reakcija na popularizaciju čitanja romana u 18. stoljeću u Engleskoj kako bi se pokazalo da se žestoko protivljenje toj dokoličnoj praksi može shvatiti u kontekstu suvremenog sociološkog pojma – "moralne panike" – te se na taj način čitanje romana može protumačiti kao rana pojava popularne medijske kulture. Nakon opisivanja kulturnog konteksta Engleske u 18. stoljeću, kao i glavnih obilježja romana toga doba, ovaj rad proučava zabrinutosti koje proizlaze iz zanimanja za fikciju te iznosi argumentaciju onodobnih moralnih dušobrižnika koja podupire bojazan od čitanja. Ova analiza otkriva da je reakcija protivljenja čitanju doista uključivala sve ključne elemente fenomena moralne panike. Održavajući dijaloški odnos 18. stoljeća i današnjice, u zaključku članka povlače se usporednice sa suvremenim reakcijama na gledanje televizije, a zabrinutost u vezi sa širenjem romana povezuje se s još jednim srodnim pojmom, medijskom panikom, te se na taj način pokazuje da ono što se smatra prepoznatljivim obilježjem moderne (20. i 21. stoljeća) kulture masovnih medija, zapravo, ima mnogo dužu povijest.

Ključne riječi: moralna panika, romani, žensko čitateljstvo, Engleska 18. stoljeća, medijska panika