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Postfeminist Inflections in Television Studies

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Abstract: To better understand how postfeminism might inform media production, consumption and media scholarship, this essay explores a set of arguments that circulate around the intersection of postfeminism and media studies. Our discussion begins by tracing the complexity and controversy around the concept of postfeminism to clarify the term and draw out its more productive strands. In surveying the formal properties of postfeminist media texts and ways in which the concept progresses feminist media analysis, we also identify a set of limitations in the concept and this leads us to a cautionary conclusion about the balance between descriptive and analytical tools and political action.

Keywords: postfeminism and media, feminist media studies, neoliberal economics, female agency, female audiences, women in creative industries, women in television

Introduction

In 2011 *Console-ing Passions*, the long-standing international conference exploring the intersections of gender, media, and feminism, was held in South Australia - the second time to meet in the southern hemisphere in the gathering's twenty year history. The conference was notable for the wide range of media under consideration, in addition to and in conjunction with television. Scholarship on new media forms and practices has moved from the margins into the center of media studies and shares important links with television studies, sometimes as inheritor and sometimes as challenger. In addition to a wealth of papers on games, online, and mobile media forms, a strong theme at the conference emerged around the concept of postfeminism.¹ This issue of *Continuum* presents a selection of papers from the

conference proceedings that commonly share an intersection with questions of postfeminism and what it means to make and consume television as a woman in the first quarter of the 21st century. At the conference and through the subsequent call for publication, the papers about postfeminism mapped quite neatly onto three traditional concerns of media studies, namely production, textual, and reception studies.

Collectively these essays interrogate changes in feminist scholarship and women's participation in the television industry through these focal points.

The emergent themes that circulate around a discussion of postfeminism and television seem to fall into the following areas. Firstly the ways in which are women participating and contributing to production cultures in the “postfeminist” era. Secondly, the terms on which “women’s television” sustains a dialog with feminism(s) in the so-called postfeminist era. Thirdly, whether or not reception studies retain their links to feminist theory and practice amidst industrial, market, political, and ideological changes. Fourthly, a new media landscape changes and contours reception studies. These areas of concern are addressed from different methodological approaches across six individual essays in this issue. This introductory essay canvasses the intellectual heritage of postfeminism in media studies, to establish a common, if not altogether stable, ground from which to consider this collection.

What is postfeminism?

It was recently suggested that postfeminism has seen its day, or had its moment; that like other trends in scholarly discourse, postfeminism might soon lose its cache.² In its disengagement with the *structures* of patriarchy, it is possible that postfeminism fails

to offer any valid strategy for change. We want to consider this, and other questions we have about the continued usefulness of postfeminism to television studies. For instance what does postfeminism offer an analysis of women's participation in the media workforce? How do we link an understanding or acknowledgement of neo-liberalist micro-politics with a critique of structures and an action agenda for structural change? By way of introduction, this essay explores the complexity and controversy around the concept of postfeminism to clarify what we mean by "postfeminist" before drawing out possibly productive strands from that complexity and identifying some limitations of the concept. We explicitly frame this discussion by first acknowledging that even where feminism has made considerable gains for women, across the globe women's social health remains a battlefield. Women still endure oppression and disadvantage in many areas, including access to education and healthcare, economic empowerment, and still suffer violence in many forms and contexts. The existence of postfeminism does not mean we are post-patriarchy.

Postfeminism has a range of meanings and uses and thus a history of considerable complexity and controversy. More often it is the adjective, "postfeminist," that is used to describe or qualify something else: cannon; context; culture; landscape; politics; sensibility; and women to name a few. (Tasker & Negra, 2007; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Genz & Brabon, 2009; Karlyn 2011) Yet, without an agreed definition of what we mean by "postfeminism" confusion is unavoidable. What is "post" about postfeminism? Is it post, as in "after" feminism, implying that feminism is over, or post in the sense of post-structuralism – a concept that incorporates and builds on structuralism, hence a concept that extends feminism?

The multiplicity of definitions and lack of consensus around the term has resulted in some calling for an acceptance of such diversity as definitive. Stephanie

Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon (2009) eschew a singular definition and instead discuss “diverse manifestations of postfeminism” to “draw connections between these postfeminist expressions” (p.2). They seek to acknowledge postfeminism’s “plurality and liminality” because it is both “retro- and neo- in its outlook” and as they say, “irrevocably post-” (pp.7-8). Thus they argue, “the attempt to fix *the* meaning of postfeminism looks futile and even misguided, as each articulation is by itself a definitional act that (re)constructs the meaning of feminism and its own relation to it” (pp.4-5). While they refuse to define the term, they continue to ascribe qualities to it; for instance, that postfeminism has “commercial appeal”, an issue that we address later in this essay.

Historically, the term “post-feminism” was first used in the period after the achievement of women’s suffrage and before the rise of ‘second-wave’ feminism in the 1960s. “It denoted the successful outcome of struggles by women for the right to vote, hold public office and the choice to occupy many more personal spheres” (Alice, 1995:7). In this early writing on the subject, Lynne Alice distinguishes that early sense from a more recent use in the late 20th century whereby “the belief that the seventies struggle for women’s rights has achieved all that was reasonable to expect ...feminist lobbying has been ‘exposed’ as a passé anti-male fad” (p.7). Similarly, Angela McRobbie (2009) has pointed out that a resurrection of the term appeared in a 1982 *New York Times* article to denote a pro-woman but not angry or strident feminist politics. She calls this a journalistic notion of postfeminism (2009:31) and distinguishes it from the way in which the term has come to be applied in media studies. This distinction, between a scholarly analytic tool and a popular understanding of postfeminism is but one opposition that appears in the discourse and which we return to later in this essay.

We find the most productive definition of postfeminism describes the political moment in which the material and ideological gains of second wave feminism have been accepted and incorporated into our mainstream values and common ambitions at the same time as neoliberal economics and its associated social policies - including a reduction in social welfare support – have become entrenched. (McRobbie, 2009) The extension of the neoliberalist logic is a view that individuals can and should be responsible for themselves. That is to say, postfeminism assumes that the gains of second wave feminism have been “taken into account” (ie. equal opportunity, wage equity, autonomy) and individuals, not structures, are to assume responsibility for the conditions of their existence. Consequently, agency for change is understood to reside primarily with the individual, rather than in collective action or with society.

Such associations with individualized and private, rather than collective and public, action are indicative of neoliberal and consumerist agendas that mark the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Thus postfeminism has been described as “part of a Third Way political economy, participating in the discourses of capitalism and neo-liberalism that encourage women to concentrate on their private lives and consumer capacities as the sites for self-expression and agency” (Genz, 2006:337-8). Whatever gains women have made within the public sphere appear to be undermined by the instruction to exercise individual agency and express themselves through private acts of consumption. Postfeminism, Genz argues,

taps into a variety of often competing discourses, seeking to combine the supposed freedoms of neo-liberalism with the demands of a capitalist economy, the female agency celebrated by the feminist movement with a patriarchal interest in heterosexual femininity. (Genz, 2006:344)

Consumerism thus replaces traditional political action and, individual acts of consumption are deemed to be political acts. Such consumerist self-expression has

been called the micropolitics of postfeminism. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2007:2) add a degree of personification to the concept when they characterize it as a commodification of feminism “via the figure of woman as empowered consumer.”

Clarifying that the “post” of postfeminism does not describe the history of a movement, Linda Mizejewski explains that, “‘postfeminism’ now accurately describes how filmmakers, audiences, and the media may conceptualize certain characters and narratives” (Mizejewski, 2005:122). Among the most prominent and commonly cited examples are *Ally McBeal*, *Sex in the City* and the Bridget Jones franchise.

Postfeminism & Formal Elements of Media

Postfeminism manifests in identifiable ways in the formal elements of many recent texts. In this section we consider the ways in which postfeminist ideas arise in themes, tropes, narrative structures, characters, and the presentation of gender politics.

Having established a relationship between postfeminism, previous feminist agendas and neoliberal economics, several scholars have identified formal elements of postfeminism in media. Gill (2007) notes the following markers of postfeminist representations: “confident, sexually assertive women dominate, irony is ubiquitous, and men’s bodies are presented as erotic spectacles almost as much as women’s” (2007:74). She further urges media scholars to “examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media” including

the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; the articulation of entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture;

and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. These themes, I want to suggest, coexist with stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to ‘race’ and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability – as well as gender. (Gill, 2007:255)

Identifying key narratives of postfeminism, Diane Negra (2009) has described a set of prominent tropes: “return to hometown”, “time crisis”, “hyperdomesticity and self-care”, and narratives about working “girls” with down-gear career ambition in jobs like dog walking, waitressing and retail sales. Anthea Taylor (2012) argues that there is a gender bias in postfeminism’s “having it all” discourse because “women having both public and private identities is still seen to be problematic (in a way that it never was for men) [and this] points to the very necessity of feminism as a political project not to its success” (Taylor, 2012:17). Taylor explains that the heterosexual romance plot “delimits the kinds of narratives circulating about single women and kinds of feminine subjectivities that are seen as inhabitable” (p. 3). A single heterosexual woman does not ‘have it all’ because she is not coupled. Compulsory coupling is so widely accepted that we have many TV shows about finding Mr/Miss Right. In this genre, more than any other, we see “single woman-as-lack” most obviously. The man is the rare prize and women compete with one another for the prize. Even the British *Laddette to Lady*, while overtly about class make-over and refinement of the laddish women, is entrenched in the narrative of compulsory heterosexual coupling as the sign of a successful transformation.

Australia’s *The Farmer Wants a Wife* is also embedded in specific narratives of Australia’s national culture and the importance of “the land.” The “lucky woman” in “the lucky country” gives up all to move to the farm; the farmer doesn’t just want a wife, he wants a farm wife. He’s not willing to relocate or change careers, but she is meant to find such a dislocation and relocation entirely manageable and, extrapolating

the happily ever after, fulfilling as well (Taylor, pp. 111-115). To reiterate, the prominence of these narrative themes points to the continued necessity of a feminist project and not to its completion. Thus a notion of “post” as after or beyond would appear impossible.

Does Postfeminism offer an Analytical Approach in Media Studies?

In addition to postfeminism giving rise to a set of tropes, common representations of gender, and other formal narrative markers, we are interested in the question of whether postfeminism has also generated approaches to media analysis and ways to think about today’s media. Returning now to the distinction between a popular notion of postfeminism and a scholarly notion that might be marshaled in media analysis, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn (2011) squarely situates postfeminism as originating in “popular discourse of the 1990s to suggest that in the contemporary era, feminism had lost its relevance” (Karlyn: 26). In other words, postfeminism is not an academically grounded approach, but one arising from popular discourse.

Feminist analyses are grounded in an understanding of women as a class under patriarchy accounting for women in all their variety of contexts, and subjectivities at the intersections of race, class and age. From this base feminist media research endeavors to explore and expose the many ways in which media are implicated in forming and maintaining, or alternatively shaping and changing, the structures and practices of patriarchy. Aside from its focus on women and girls, postfeminism, with its preference for individual agency, and its disengagement from issues of structure and collective action, would not seem to offer up a particularly distinct analytical approach.

It is important not to confuse an analysis of postfeminist texts with a postfeminist analytical approach. Feminist media analysis offers the tools necessary to address the gender and sexual politics in contemporary media texts, the industries that produce/market them, and the negotiation of these texts by consumer/viewer/spectators in their everyday lives. Rather than postfeminism doing away with feminism, contemporary popular media often highlight the necessity of feminism as a critical theory and political practice because they continually present unresolved contradictions of “having it all” and yet still being unsatisfied with whatever “having it” means. In the end, happiness for *Sex in the City*'s Carrie is never sustained by the purchase of a new pair of Manolo Blaniks. It is the search for some sort of balance and enduring happiness that appears to drive the narrative from week to week and ultimately the series ends with three out of the four women in heterosexual couples, as if it could not end otherwise.

As an analytical approach, postfeminism may offer up more contradictions than coherence, but understanding postfeminism as a “sensibility,” following Rosalind Gill (2007), does not necessarily do away with a previous notion of feminist practice in media studies. To the contrary, the present is informed by the past and postfeminism is constituted through predecessor feminisms; they co-exist. Queer studies and postcolonial studies have informed and influenced the development of feminism as much as the postmodern feminisms of the late 1980s (see for instance the essays collected in Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/Postmodernism* (1990)). Contemporary academic feminism in the Anglo-American tradition has become more aware of diversity in the lived experience of womanhood under different instantiations of patriarchy and subjectivities of race, class, age and sexuality. This is an important

sense of “post” in postfeminism but this still is not meant to suggest that we are postpatriarchy.

Postfeminism has not, however, generated new research methods or modes of analysis. Instead, postfeminism relies on feminist modes of analysis while the objects of study diversify particularly with new developments in media. Most recently the new objects that deserve our attention include digital games and online, networked media (Humphreys and Vered, 2014). There also remains a need for collective action towards structural change, despite the many narratives that suggest we ought to accept patriarchy and buy expensive shoes on *his* credit card.

In 1995 Lynne Alice declared that, “ ‘postfeminism’ adds little to feminism’s encounter with postmodern challenges to identity, community and politics, but provides a timely caution about the complex intersections of definition and location” (p. 8). She goes so far as to suggest that the overemphasis on individual agency is antithetical to feminism:

It is also a distortion and undermining of feminist politics and strategies that have already changed and continue to change many women’s lives for the better. The reduction of social goals to matters of individual lifestyle undercuts the possible strategic weight of feminist collectivities for change and may very well reinscribe the marginality of women. (Alice, 1995:23)

An alternative conceptualization of postfeminism offered by Ann Brooks (1997) describes postfeminism as a challenge to “hegemonic feminism” - the Anglo-American second wave feminism that overlooked women of colour and others in its discourse of equality among women. Karlyn has added that, “women with children did not identify with the Second Wave because they did not see what it offered them as mothers” (2011:17). That is to say, white middle class women who did not work out of the home in the USA did not embrace the potential benefit of the Equal Rights

Amendment movement that was for some, the epitome of second wave feminism. Under this characterisation of postfeminism, the ‘post’ as critique, there are distinctive analytical possibilities, but these have mostly been incorporated into much feminist analyses since the mid 1990s.

To this point we have outlined a number of positions on postfeminism. We can identify the broad cultural sensibility in the West that takes for granted the gains of second wave feminism and incorporates that “new woman” into a place of privilege in a neoliberal economy. This sensibility has given rise to particular media forms and in turn feminists have approached these media texts with a tool kit that includes an understanding of that very sensibility. Through surveying the different definitions of postfeminism, we have identified how the various strands of the discussion contribute in different ways to building up an understanding of postfeminism that can be operationalized in media analysis. Nevertheless, a set of objections that we cannot wish away continue to circulate around the notion of postfeminism and mainly pertain to its political stance and strength.

Feminist Reservations or the Limitations of Postfeminism

At one level, postfeminism can be seen as the “duh” moment of western feminism when the hegemonic discourse began to recognize that all women did not experience patriarchy in the same way and differences among women came to be acknowledged and incorporated into feminist analytical and political practices. Patriarchy operates differently in different contexts, and so, there cannot be one feminism, nor one experience of subjectivity under patriarchy (Brooks, 1997:13). Feminist theory and practice need to acknowledge various positions that women occupy but not allow that

granularity to dissolve into a celebration of consumerist micropolitics in which only women of relative privilege can participate.

Along with postcolonial and queer theory, feminism has begun to include a greater diversity of women's experience to build a more inclusive agenda. Genz & Brabon (2009) argue that second wave feminism assumed a singular subjectivity and postmodern, postcolonial and queer theories have shown us that such uniformity is impossible. We agree that the "postfeminist consumer is endowed with contradictory forms of subjectivity and agency that allow for 'choice'..." (Genz & Brabon, 2009:26), but to assume that the subject of second wave feminism was without conflict, contradiction or agency is a serious mistake. Diversity and subjectivity as they intersect with politics was under-theorized by earlier feminist scholarship despite their presence in lived experience and activism. The female subject of politics has been represented by a narrow definition of woman. An assumed position of singularity that claimed universality for the purposes of solidarity was unable to address the needs of all women.

Perhaps one of the more unhelpful aspects of postfeminism's myth of free choice and cult of the individual has been to assist in the processes that drive a further wedge between the "west and the rest", particularly with respect to identifying shared interests and agendas.

The appeal to young women in the West, that they are the fortunate beneficiaries of Western sexual freedoms, now actively pitches them against gender arrangements in other cultures where female sexuality is subjected to different modes of surveillance and control. (McRobbie, 2009:26)

McRobbie argues that Western women are "encouraged to conceive of themselves as *grateful subjects* of modern states and cultures which permit such freedoms unlike repressive or fundamentalist regimes" (2009:27; emphasis added). Gratitude and

appreciation are two distinct sentiments. We ought to appreciate our rights and freedoms but being grateful implies that women continue to occupy a subjugated role in a power hierarchy that is indefensible. More than just relative sexual freedom separates Anglo/American/Australian women from others. We also have different educational opportunities, health care provisions, working conditions, and a myriad of other privileges that are too often unarticulated and taken for granted. As we write this, pregnant women in Pakistan are being pulled from the rubble of a collapsed garment factory - a stark reminder of our relative privilege.

A postfeminist micropolitics is inadequate to the task of addressing these structural inequities. In neo-liberalist contexts, consumer citizenship replaces welfare provision but only benefits the already privileged classes. The deal that women are being asked to take up goes something like this: We acknowledge the hard won gains of feminism by saying, “thanks, I’ll have that feminist gain and I’ll be on my individual path to equality now.” The biggest problem with the theory of micropolitics is that it lacks an account of social class and other contouring constraints and influences. While it may be expressed by an individual or through individual acts, choice is surely informed by class and other subjectivities. Even an account of political activism must acknowledge the class inflection of that activism. There is no such thing as a level playing field.

On the other hand, how does macro politics deal with difference? McRobbie held out hope for the concept of postfeminism in 1994 when she asked,

What happens to feminism when it confronts questions of difference and fragmentation, when as a universalist movement, feminism finds itself under attack from women who want to state their difference? Can the term post-feminism occupy any useful place in cultural theory and in sociology?” (McRobbie, 1994:6)

That wished-for diversity of voices has not emerged; postfeminism is “white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self” (Tasker & Negra, 2007:2). Even its narrative fictions are exclusionary and rarely focus on women of color. Tasker and Negra also maintain a reservation of hope for postfeminism in that they see a “potential for a diverse feminist politics (one that addresses class and race as emphatically as it does gender and generation) in response to a postfeminist culture exemplified by the figure of the white, middle-class, heterosexual woman” (2007:16). Accepting the contradictions of postfeminist discourse, they suggest that we cease debate over the concept itself and instead embrace its ambivalence and seek “strategies we might adopt in relation to its pervasive insistence on the bleakness and redundancy of feminism” (2007:19). They encourage a continued dialog with postfeminism rather than a rejection of it entirely. The essays collected in this issue participate in just such a dialog, and make considerable progress toward addressing the issues we’ve outlined above.

In the essays that follow feminist analysis is marshaled in the exploration of postfeminist texts, reception practices and workforce composition and experience. Alison Horbury’s careful exploration of the intersections of feminist media scholarship and “postfeminist sensibilities” through the figure of postfeminist heroines picks up where we leave off here and highlights the contradictions and possibilities for future feminist projects. She identifies an impasse, a deadlock in the way that feminism is able to respond to postfeminism, and in particular how this crisis plays out over the woman’s body and what it is to be woman.

The postfeminist heroine is also the object of study for Hannah Hamad in her analysis of the *Ashes to Ashes* series, in which she identifies how the representations of the heroine map onto the economic crash of 2008 and more broadly to a crisis in

capitalism. She tracks the impact of the recent recession on permissible representations of feminine and masculine subjectivities.

Monique Bourdage addresses the question of how postfeminist representations are taken up and understood by women of different generations. In a qualitative study of feminist viewers of *Mad Men* she explores the spectrum of responses as these women negotiate the “doubling” of time. Her interview-based research draws out how those who lived through the era of *Mad Men* and those who did not respond to the show’s narrative and characters with varying degrees of optimism.

Approaching reception studies from a different angle, Julia Erhart engages with fan discourse and the clip culture commentary of YouTube to explore the reception of Australian writer/performer Chris Lilley’s gender play humour. The role of postfeminist tropes of irony as they intersect with gender and the license that irony may or may not grant, is examined through fan commentary on various YouTube videos of Lilley’s gender non-conformist characters.

Sue Turnbull focuses our attention on the award winning Australian prime-time drama, *Underbelly*. She examines the roles that women occupy in both real life, production, and as characters within the show. In a thoughtful interweaving of the layers, she traces the way lives of real women in Melbourne’s “underworld” are narrativized by women working within the constraints of a very masculine television production, and by the performances of female actors in the series. Situating her study within the long history of women’s crime fiction she assesses the relative power of women in their variously male-dominated contexts.

The collection concludes with Lisa French’s concrete assessment of gender (im)balance within the Australian television workforce. Using statistical and survey data she updates past studies with a current interrogation of women’s workforce

participation. Despite legislation designed to promote gender balance in the workforce, few gains have been made and female “ghettos” remain within the industry.

We think this collection of essays exemplifies the continuing need for a feminist project of change, irrespective of what popular postfeminist discourse may suggest. The essays individually and then collectively build an argument for the importance of feminism as an approach that encompasses collective, structural and individual levels at play within the media field. One interpretation of this collection of essays is that as a whole they interrogate the idea of postfeminist texts, but using the tools of feminism to do so. Postfeminism in its most populist (and perhaps most well understood) form with its micropolitics of privilege and consumerism, does not in itself, offer a framework for critique or plan for change.

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Notes

¹ *Console-ing Passions* 2011 was organized through a collaboration among colleagues

² Charlotte Brunson raised this possibility in a plenary discussion of the 2013 *Television for Women* conference at University of Warwick, Coventry, UK. See also Brunson's 2013 essay, "Television Crime Series, Women Police, and Fuddy-Duddy Feminism," in *Feminist Media Studies* 13(3).