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# POST-FEMINISM AND POPULAR CULTURE

Angela McRobbie

## Introduction: Complexification of Backlash?

This article presents a series of possible conceptual frames for engaging with what has come to be known as post-feminism. It understands post-feminism to refer to an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined. It proposes that through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism. It then proposes that this undoing which can be perceived in the broad cultural field is compounded by some dynamics in sociological theory (including the work of Giddens and Beck) which appear to be most relevant to aspects of gender and social change. Finally it suggests that by means of the tropes of freedom and choice which are now inextricably connected with the category of "young women," feminism is decisively aged and made to seem redundant. Feminism is cast into the shadows, where at best it can expect to have some afterlife, where it might be regarded ambivalently by those young women who must in more public venues stake a distance from it, for the sake of social and sexual recognition. I propose a complexification then of the backlash thesis which gained currency within forms of journalism associated with popular feminism (Susan Faludi 1992).

The backlash for Faludi was a concerted, conservative response to the achievements of feminism. My argument is that post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force. This was most vivid in *The Independent* (UK) newspaper column *Bridget Jones's Diary*, then in the enormously successful book and film which followed.<sup>1</sup> For my purposes here, post-feminism permits the close examination of a number of intersecting but also conflicting currents. It allows us to examine shifts of direction in the feminist academy, while also taking into account the seeming repudiation of feminism within this very same academic context by those young women who are its unruly (student) subjects. Broadly I am arguing that for feminism to be "taken into account" it has to be understood as having already passed away. This is a movement detectable across popular culture, a site where "power ... is remade at various junctures within everyday life, (constituting) our tenuous sense of common sense" (Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau & Slavoj Zizek 2000, p. 14). Some fleeting comments in Judith Butler's short book *Antigone's Claim* (2000) suggests to me that post-feminism can be explored through what I would describe as a "double entanglement". This comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life (for example, George Bush supporting the campaign to encourage chastity among young people, and

in March 2004 declaring that civilisation itself depends on traditional marriage), with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations (for example, gay couples now able to adopt, foster or have their own children by whatever means, and in the UK at least, full rights to civil partnerships). It also encompasses the co-existence of feminism as at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated (Angela McRobbie 2003). The taken into accountness permits all the more thorough dismantling of feminist politics and the discrediting of the occasionally voiced need for its renewal.

### **Feminism Dismantling Itself**

The impact of this “double entanglement” which is manifest in popular and political culture, coincides however, with feminism in the academy finding it necessary to dismantle itself. For the sake of periodisation, we could say that 1990 (or thereabouts) marks a turning point, the moment of definitive self-critique in feminist theory. At this time the representational claims of second wave feminism come to be fully interrogated by post-colonialist feminists like Spivak, Trinh, and Mohanty among others, and by feminist theorists like Butler and Haraway who inaugurate the radical de-naturalising of the post-feminist body (Judith Butler 1990; Donna Haraway 1991; Chandra T. Mohanty 1995; [Gayatri Spivak 1988](#); T. Minha Trinh 1989). Under the prevailing influence of Foucault, there is a shift away from feminist interest in centralised power blocks—e.g., the State, patriarchy, law—to more dispersed sites, events and instances of power conceptualised as flows and specific convergences and consolidations of talk, discourse, and attentions. The body and also the subject come to represent a focal point for feminist interest, nowhere more so than in the work of Butler. The concept of subjectivity and the means by which cultural forms and interpellations (or dominant social processes) call women into being, produce them as subjects whilst ostensibly merely describing them as such, inevitably means that it is a problematically “she,” rather than an unproblematically “we,” which is indicative of a turn to what we might describe as the emerging politics of post-feminist inquiry (Butler 1990, 1993).

In feminist cultural studies the early 1990s also marks a moment of feminist reflexivity. In her article “Pedagogies of the Feminine” Brunson queried the hitherto assumed use value to feminist media scholarship of the binary opposition between femininity and feminism, or as she put it the extent to which the “housewife” or “ordinary woman” was conceived of as the assumed subject of attention for feminism (Charlotte Brunson [1991] 1997). Looking back we can see how heavily utilised this dualism was, and also how particular it was to gender arrangements for largely white and relatively affluent (i.e. housewifely) women. The year 1990 also marked the moment at which the concept of popular feminism found expression. Andrea Stuart (1990) considered the wider circulation of feminist values across the landscape of popular culture, in particular magazines, where quite suddenly issues which had been central to the formation of the women’s movement like domestic violence, equal pay, and workplace harassment, were now addressed to a vast readership. The wider dissemination of feminist issues was also a key concern in my own writing at this time, in particular the intersection of these new representations with the daily lives of young women who as subjects (“called into being”) of popular feminism, might then be expected to embody more emboldened (though also of course “failed”) identities. This gave rise to the idea of feminist success. Of course no

sooner is the word "success" written than it is queried. How could this be gauged? What might be the criteria for judging degrees of feminist success?

### Female Success

Admittedly there is some extravagance in my claim for feminist success. It might be more accurate to remark on the keen interest across the quality and popular media (themselves wishing to increase their female readers and audiences), in ideas of female success. As feminist values are indeed taken on board within a range of institutions, including law, education, to an extent medicine, likewise employment, and the media, high profile or newsworthy achievement of women and girls in these sectors shows the institutions to be modern and abreast with social change. This is the context then within which feminism is acknowledged and this is what I mean by feminism taken into account. Feminist success has, so far, only been described sporadically (for accounts of girls' achievement in education see Madeleine Arnot, Miriam David & Gaby Weiner 1999; and also Anita Harris 2003). Within media and cultural studies both Brunsdon and myself have each considered how with feminism as part of the academic curriculum, i.e. "canonised," then it is not surprising that it might also be countered, that is feminism must face up to the consequences of its own claims to representation and power, and not be so surprised when young women students decline the invitation to identify as a "we" with their feminist teachers and scholars (Charlotte Brunsdon [1991] 1997; Angela McRobbie 1999a). This interface between the feminist academy and the student body has also been discussed in US feminist journals particularly in regard to the decline of women's studies (Wendy Brown 1997). Back in the early 1990s and following Butler, I saw this sense of contestation on the part of young women, and what I would call their "distance from feminism" as one of potential, where a lively dialogue about how feminism might develop would commence ([Judith Butler 1992](#); [Angela McRobbie 1994](#)). Indeed it seemed in the very nature of feminism that it gave rise to dis-identification as a kind of requirement for its existence. But still, it seems now, over a decade later, that this space of "distance from feminism" and those utterances of forceful non-identity with feminism have consolidated into something closer to repudiation rather than ambivalence, and it is this vehemently denunciatory stance which is manifest across the field of popular gender debate. This is the cultural space of post-feminism.

In this context it requires both imagination and hopefulness to argue that the active, sustained, and repetitive repudiation or repression of feminism also marks its (still fearful) presence or even longevity (as afterlife). What I mean by this is that there are different kinds of repudiation and different investments in such a stance. The more gentle denunciations of feminism (as in the film *Bridget Jones's Diary*) co-exists however with the shrill championing of young women as a "metaphor for social change" on the pages of the right wing press in the UK, in particular the *Daily Mail*. This anti-feminist endorsement of female individualisation is embodied in the figure of the ambitious "TV blonde" (Angela McRobbie 1999b).<sup>2</sup> These so-called "A1" girls are glamorous high-achievers destined for Oxford or Cambridge and are usually pictured clutching A-level certificates. We might say these are ideal girls, subjects *par excellence*, and also subjects of excellence. Nor are these notions of female success exclusive to the changing representations of young women in the countries of the affluent west. As Gayatri Spivak (1999) has argued in the impoverished zones of the world, governments and NGOs also look to the minds and bodies of

young women for whom education comes to promise enormous economic and demographic rewards. Young women are a good investment, they can be trusted with micro-credit, they are the privileged subjects of social change. But the terms of these great expectations on the part of governments are that young women must do without more autonomous feminist politics. What is consistent is the over-shadowing indeed displacement of feminism as a political movement. It is this displacement which reflects Butler's sorrowful account of Antigone's life after death. Her shadowy, lonely existence, suggests a modality of feminist effectivity as spectral, she has to be cast out, indeed entombed for social organisation to once again become intelligible.

### Unpopular Feminism

The media has become the key site for defining codes of sexual conduct. It casts judgement and establishes the rules of play. Across these many channels of communication feminism is routinely disparaged. This is another Butler point, why is feminism so hated? Why do young women recoil in horror at the very idea of the feminist? To count as a girl today appears to require this kind of ritualistic denunciation, which in turn suggests that one strategy in the disempowering of feminism includes it being historicised and generationalised and thus easily rendered out of date. It would be far too simplistic to trace a pattern in media from popular feminism (or "prime time feminism" including TV programmes like *L.A. Law*) in the early 1990s, to niche feminism (BBC Radio 4, Women's Hour, and the Women's Page of *The Guardian* newspaper), in the mid-1990s, and then to overtly unpopular feminism (new century), as though these charted a chronological "great moving right show" as Stuart Hall might put it (1989). We would need a more developed conceptual schema to account for the simultaneous feminisation of popular media with this accumulation of ambivalent, fearful responses. We would certainly need to signal the full enfranchisement of women in the west, of all ages as audiences, active consumers of media and the many products it promotes, and by virtue of education, earning power, and consumer identity a sizeable block of target market. We would also need to be able to theorise female achievement predicated not on feminism, but on "female individualism," on success which seems to be based on the invitation to young women by various governments that they might now consider themselves free to compete in education and in work as privileged subjects of the new meritocracy. Is this then the new deal for, in the UK, New Labour's "modern" young women, female individualisation and the new meritocracy at the expense of feminist politics?

There are various sites within popular culture where this work of undoing feminism with some subtlety becomes visible (see also Charlotte Brunsdon 2004). The Wonderbra advert showing the model Eva Herzigova looking down admiringly at her substantial cleavage enhanced by the lacy pyrotechnics of the Wonderbra, was through the mid-1990s positioned in major high street locations in the UK on full size billboards. The composition of the image had such a textbook "sexist ad" dimension that one could be forgiven for supposing some familiarity with both cultural studies and with feminist critiques of advertising (Judith Williamson 1987). It was, in a sense, taking feminism into account by showing it to be a thing of the past, by provocatively "enacting sexism" while at the same time playing with those debates in film theory about women as the object of the gaze (Laura Mulvey 1975) and even with female desire (Rosalind Coward 1984; [Teresa de Lauretis 1988](#)). The picture is in noirish black and white and refers explicitly

through its captions (from "Hello Boys" to "Or Are You Just Pleased To See Me?") to Hollywood and the famous lines of the actress Mae West. Here is an advertisement which plays back to its viewers, well known aspects of feminist media studies, film theory and semiotics, indeed it almost offers (albeit crudely) the viewer or passing driver Laura Mulvey's theory of women as object of the gaze projected as cityscape within the frame of the billboard. Also mobilised in this ad is the familiarity of the term "political correctness," the efficacy of which resides in its warranting and unleashing such energetic reactions against the seemingly tyrannical regime of feminist puritanism. Everyone and especially young people can give a sigh of relief. Thank goodness it is permissible, once again, to enjoy looking at the bodies of beautiful women. At the same time the advertisement expects to provoke feminist condemnation as a means of generating publicity. Thus generational differences are also generated, the younger female viewer, along with her male counterparts, educated in irony and visually literate, is not made angry by such a repertoire. She appreciates its layers of meaning; she gets the joke.

When in a TV advertisement (1998/9) another supermodel, Claudia Schiffer, took off her clothes as she descended a flight of stairs in a luxury mansion on her way out of the door towards her new Citroen car, a similar rhetoric is at work. This advert appears to suggest that yes, this is a self-consciously "sexist ad," feminist critiques of it are deliberately evoked. Feminism is "taken into account," but only to be shown to be no longer necessary. Why? Because there is no exploitation here, there is nothing remotely naïve about this striptease. She seems to be doing it out of choice, and for her own enjoyment; the advert works on the basis of its audience knowing Claudia to be one of the world's most famous and highly paid supermodels. Once again, the shadow of disapproval is introduced (the striptease as site of female exploitation), only instantly to be dismissed as belonging to the past, to a time when feminists used to object to such imagery. To make such an objection nowadays would run the risk of ridicule. Objection is pre-empted with irony. In each of these cases a spectre of feminism is invoked so that it might be undone; for male viewers tradition is restored or as Beck puts it there is "constructed certitude," while for the girls what is proposed is a movement beyond feminism, to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for themselves (Ulrich Beck 1992).

### **Feminism Undone?**

If we turn attention to some of the participatory dynamics in leisure and everyday life which see young women endorse (or else refuse to condemn) the ironic normalisation of pornography, where they indicate their approval of and desire to be pin up girls for the centrefolds of the soft porn "lad mags," where it is not at all unusual to pass young women in the street wearing T-shirts bearing phrases such as "Porn Queen" or "Pay To Touch" across the breasts, and where in the UK at least young women quite happily attend lap dancing clubs (perhaps as a test of their sophistication and "cool"), we are witness to a hyper-culture of commercial sexuality, one aspect of which is the repudiation of a feminism invoked only to be summarily dismissed (see also Rosalind Gill 2003). As a mark of a post-feminist identity young women journalists refuse to condemn the enormous growth of lap dancing clubs despite the opportunities available for them to do so across the media. They know of the existence of the feminist critiques and debates (or at least this is my claim) through their education, as Shelley Budgeon (2001) has described

the girls in her study, they are gender aware. Thus the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom. There is quietude and complicity in the manners of generationally specific notions of cool, and more precisely an uncritical relation to dominant commercially produced sexual representations which actively invoke hostility to assumed feminist positions from the past in order to endorse a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation and pleasure, free of politics.<sup>3</sup>

### Female Individualisation

By using the term "female individualisation" I am explicitly drawing on the concept of individualisation which is discussed at length by sociologists including Anthony Giddens (1991), Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) as well as Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 2001). This work is to be distinguished from the more directly Foucauldian version found in the work of Nikolas Rose (2000). Although there is some shared ground between these authors, insofar as they all reflect on the expectations that individuals now avidly self-monitor and that there appears to be greater capacity on the part of individuals to plan "a life of one's own," there are also divergences. Beck and Giddens are less concerned with the effectivity of power in this new friendly guise as personal advisor, and instead emphasise the enlargement of freedom and choice, while in contrast Rose sees these modes of self government as marking out "the shaping of being," and thus the "inculcation of a form of life" (Rose 2000). Bauman bewails the sheer unviability of naked individualisation as the resources of sociality (and welfare) are stripped away, leaving the individual to self-blame when success eludes him or her. (It is also possible to draw a political line between these authors with Bauman and Rose to the left, and Giddens and Beck in the centre.<sup>4</sup>) My emphasis here is on the work of Giddens and Beck, for the very reason that it appears to speak directly to the post-feminist generation. In their writing there are only distant echoes (if that) of the feminist struggles that were required to produce the new-found freedoms of young women in the west. There is little trace of the battles fought, of the power struggles embarked upon, or of the enduring inequities which still mark out the relations between men and women. All of this is airbrushed out of existence on the basis that, as they claim, "emancipatory politics" has given way instead to life politics (or in Beck's terms the sub-politics of single interest groups).

Both of these authors provide a sociological account of the dynamics of social change understood as "reflexive modernisation" (Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens & Scott Lash 1994). The earlier period of modernisation ("first modernity") created a welfare state and a set of institutions (e.g. education) which allowed people in the "second modernity" to become more independent and able, for example, to earn their own living. Young women are, as a result, now "dis-embedded" from communities where gender roles were fixed. And, as the old structures of social class fade away, and lose their grip in the context of "late or second modernity," individuals are increasingly called upon to invent their own structures. They must do this internally and individualistically, so that self-monitoring practices (the diary, the life plan, the career pathway) replace reliance on set ways and structured pathways. Self-help guides, personal advisors, lifestyle coaches and gurus, and all sorts of self-improvement TV programmes provide the cultural means by which individualisation operates as a social

process. As the overwhelming force of structure fades so also does the capacity for agency increase.

Individuals must now choose the kind of life they want to live. Girls must have a lifeplan. They must become more reflexive in regard to every aspect of their lives, from making the right choice in marriage, to taking responsibility for their own working lives, and not being dependent on a job for life or on the stable and reliable operations of a large-scale bureaucracy which in the past would have allocated its employees specific, and possibly unchanging, roles. Beck and Giddens each place a different inflection on their accounts of reflexive modernisation, and these arguments appear to fit very directly with the kinds of scenarios and dilemmas facing the young women characters in the narratives of contemporary popular culture (especially so-called chick lit). There is also a real evasion in this writing of the ongoing existence of deep and pernicious gender inequities (most manifest for older women of all social backgrounds but also for young black or Asian women, and also for working class young women), but so also are Beck and Giddens inattentive to the regulative dimensions of the popular discourses of personal choice and self improvement. Choice is surely, within lifestyle culture, a modality of constraint. The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices. By these means new lines and demarcations are drawn between those subjects who are judged responsive to the regime of personal responsibility, and those who fail miserably. Neither Giddens nor Beck mount a substantial critique of these power relations which work so effectively at the level of embodiment. They have no grasp that these are productive of new realms of injury and injustice.

### **Bridget Jones**

The film *Bridget Jones's Diary* (an international box office success) draws together so many of these sociological themes it could almost have been scripted by Anthony Giddens himself. Aged 30, living and working in London, Bridget is a free agent, single and childless and able to enjoy herself in pubs, bars and restaurants, she is the product of modernity in that she has benefited from those institutions (education) which have loosened the ties of tradition and community for women, making it possible for them to be disembedded and re-located to the city to earn an independent living without shame or danger. However, this also gives rise to new anxieties. There is the fear of loneliness, for example, the stigma of remaining single, and the risks and uncertainties of not finding the right partner to be a father to children as well as a husband. In the film the opening sequence shows Bridget in her pyjamas worrying about being alone and on the shelf. The soundtrack is *All By Myself* by Jamie McNeal and the audience laughs along with her, in this moment of self doubt. We immediately know that what she is thinking is "what will it be like if I never find the right man, if I never get married?" Bridget portrays the whole spectrum of attributes associated with the self-monitoring subject; she confides in her friends, she keeps a diary, she endlessly reflects on her fluctuating weight, noting her calorie intake, she plans, plots and has projects. She is also deeply uncertain as to what the future holds for her. Despite the choices she has, there are also any number of risks of which she is regularly reminded; the risk that she might let the right man slip from under her nose (hence she must always be on the lookout), the risk that not catching a man at the right time might mean she misses the chance of having children (her biological clock is counting). There is also the risk that partnerless she will be isolated,

marginalised from the world of happy couples. Now there is only the self to blame if the right partner is not found.

With the burden of self-management so apparent, Bridget fantasises tradition. After a flirtatious encounter with her boss (played by Hugh Grant) she imagines herself in a white wedding dress surrounded by bridesmaids, and the audience laughs loudly because they, like Bridget, know that this is not how young women these days are meant to think. Feminism has intervened to constrain these kinds of conventional desires. It is then, a relief to escape this censorious politics and freely enjoy that which has been disapproved of. Thus feminism is invoked in order that it is relegated to the past. But this is not simply a return to the past, there are, of course, quite dramatic differences between the various female characters of current popular culture from Bridget Jones to the girls in *Sex and the City* and to Ally McBeal, and those found in girls' and women's magazines from a pre-feminist era. The new young women are confident enough to declare their anxieties about possible failure in regard to finding a husband, they avoid any aggressive or overtly traditional men, and they brazenly enjoy their sexuality, without fear of the sexual double standard. In addition, they are more than capable of earning their own living, and the degree of suffering or shame they anticipate in the absence of finding a husband is countered by sexual self-confidence. Being without a husband does not mean they will go without men.

With such light entertainment as this, suffused with irony and dedicated to re-inventing highly successful women's genres of film and TV, a bold and serious argument about feminism being so repudiated might seem heavy handed. These are hardly rabid anti-feminist tracts. But relations of power are indeed made and re-made within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment. These young women's genres are vital to the construction of a new "gender regime," based on the double entanglement which I have described; they endorse wholeheartedly what Rose calls "this ethic of freedom," and young women have come to the fore as the pre-eminent subjects of this new ethic. These popular texts normalise post-feminist gender anxieties so as to re-regulate young women by means of the language of personal choice. But even "well regulated liberty" can backfire (the source of comic effect), and this in turn gives rise to demarcated pathologies (leaving it too late to have a baby, failing to find a good catch, etc.) which carefully define the parameters of what constitutes liveable lives for young women without the occasion of re-invented feminism.

## NOTES

1. *Bridget Jones's Diary* appeared first as a weekly column in *The Independent* UK newspaper in 1996, its author Helen Fielding then published the diaries in book form, and the film, *Bridget Jones's Diary* directed by Sharon McGuire, opened in 2001.
2. The *Daily Mail* has the highest volume of female readers of all daily newspapers in the UK. Its most frequent efforts in regard to promoting a post-feminist sensibility involve commissioning well known former feminists to recant, and blame feminism for contemporary ills among women, for example, Saturday August 23, 2003 has Fay Weldon on "Look What We've Done." The caption then reads, "For years feminists campaigned for sexual liberation. But here, one of their leaders admits all they have created is a new generation of women for whom sex is utterly joyless and hollow" (pp. 12–13).

3. By the normalisation of porn, or “ironic pornography” I am referring to the new popular mainstreaming of what in the past would have been soft core pornography out of reach of the young on the “top shelf.” In a post AIDS era, with sexual frankness as an imperative for prevention, the commercial UK youth media now produce vast quantities of explicit sexual material for the teenage audience, in recent years and as a strategy for being ahead of the competition this has been incorporated into the language of “cool.” With irony as a trademark of knowingness, sexual cool entails “being up for it” (i.e. lap dancing clubs) without revealing any misgivings, never mind criticism, on the basis of the distance entailed in the ironic experience.
4. Anthony Giddens is architect of the Third Way politics which were embraced by New Labour in its first term of office; this polemic in turn drew on his earlier work titled *Beyond Left and Right* (Anthony Giddens 1995, 1998). Likewise Ulrich Beck was connected with the *Neue Mitte* in Germany, though the German Third Way had rather less success than its UK counterpart.

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