

## The ›F-Words‹: Postfeminism and the (Re-)Negotiation of Femaleness, Femininity, and Feminism in Popular Culture

Franka Heise

### Abstract:

Stéphanie Genz' and Anthea Taylor's works can both be regarded as valuable contributions to the ongoing discussion about the nature of postfeminism. Where Genz' work consists of a comprehensive and broad analysis of the different ways (post)femininities are presented in contemporary (foremost U.S.) popular culture, Taylor concentrates on how the figure of the single woman can be located within postfeminist media discourses.

Both books are based on the argument that contemporary representations of (post-)femininities are determined by an ambivalent relationship of femininity and feminism, simultaneously re-appropriating feminism in the form of an emphasis on power, independence, and personal freedom as well as repudiating feminism as outdated, victimizing, and 'killjoy' (see Ahmed 2010). Covering a wide range of pop culture examples, from *Sex and the City*, *Bridget Jones*, and *Fatal Attraction* to literary texts, self-help books, blogs, and reality TV shows, both authors conduct their analysis via a close reading of selected cultural texts. While Genz tries to untangle how postfeminism shapes the (re)negotiation of the 'f-words': femaleness (as embodied subject position), femininity (as performance of socially constructed gender), and feminism, Taylor elaborates how postfeminism functions to regulate the re-configuration of the 'spinster to the Singleton'.

### How to cite:

Heise, Franka: „The ›F-Words‹: Postfeminism and the (Re-)Negotiation of Femaleness, Femininity, and Feminism in Popular Culture [Review on: Genz, Stéphanie: *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009 and Taylor, Anthea: *Single Women in Popular Culture. The Limits of Postfeminism*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.]“. In: KULT\_online 33 (2012).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2012.728>

© by the authors and by KULT\_online

## The ›F-Words‹: Postfeminism and the (Re-)Negotiation of Femaleness, Femininity, and Feminism in Popular Culture

Franka Heise

Stéphanie Genz: *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009. 218 pages, hardcover, €75.99. ISBN: 978-0-230-55150-3

Anthea Taylor: *Single Women in Popular Culture. The Limits of Postfeminism*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012. 242 pages, hardcover, €65.99. ISBN: 978-0-230-27382-5

There is a growing academic body of scholarly work about the exact nature of 'postfeminism' and its role in constructing 'new femininities' (Gill and Scharff 2011) in the popular media sphere (Whelehan 1995; Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009; Negra 2009). Stéphanie Genz' work *Postfemininities in Popular Culture* here is exemplary of this development and provides a comprehensive account of how we can apply postfeminism as conceptual umbrella in order to understand recent shifts in the representation of femininities. Genz argues that contemporary postfemininities are characterized by a rejection of second wave 'victim feminism', instead they are actively drawing on notions of power, pleasure, and agency as means for self-definition. These notions, she argues, are embedded in a cultural framework that is in a constant process of realignment, which is most visibly performed and negotiated within popular culture. The popular here provides a visible and visual realm in which patriarchal representations are – often simultaneously – reproduced and challenged. Rather than applying a monolithic conceptualization of the relationship between feminism and femininity, Genz goes on to explore those postfemininities as "multiple agency positions" with "multiple layers of signification and female identification that go beyond the dualities of subject and object, perpetrator and victim, power and powerlessness" (p. 7).

Touching upon key works of the 1960s and 1970s (de Beauvoir, Friedan, Firestone, Millet, Greer), the first part of Genz' book gives an overview of 'second wave' feminism's positions in regard to socially constructed, mediated notions of femininity. She argues that postfeminism consciously positions itself against second wave's claim of patriarchal power as ubiquitous and monolithic and the subsequent, problematic assumption of women as powerless and passive. Instead postfeminism presents itself as a much more rejuvenated, mediated and "popular" form of feminism that re-appropriates "female pleasure and (sexualized) agency, intermingling feminist-inspired notions of freedom, liberation and empowerment with (hetero)sexuality, embodiment and fashion" (p. 83).

The second part of Genz' monograph consists of close reading of selected cultural texts, where she shows how, by appropriating notions of personal choice, power, and pleasure, the characters of Buffy, Miss Congeniality, and Bridget Jones (among others) re-frame traditional femininity and feminism as no longer mutually exclusive and irreconcilable categories, but as constitutive of each other. From an examination of these popular texts, Genz distills the figures of the (un)happy housewife, the superwoman, the Singleton and the supergirl as exemplary of how postfemininities are framed in contemporary popular culture.

Bridget Jones here serves not only Genz as emblematic and paradigmatic example of how postfeminist logic shapes popular representations of femininity, Anthea Taylor, in her recent study on *Single Women in Popular Culture: The Limits of Postfeminism*, draws on this example, too. But Taylor goes into more detail on this specific point to show how the postfeminist representational system structures the figure of the Singleton. Drawing on further examples – such as *Ally McBeal* and *The Bachelor*, literary texts of the chick lit and self-help genres as well as blogs – Taylor argues that the Singleton as an ambivalent, contradictory figure necessitates a complication of the discussion of how women's identity, their relationship status, and (post)feminism constitute each other.

Taylor pays specific attention to the era from the 1990s on, where – in the wake of postfeminism – single women came to be a 'hypervisible' 'cultural obsession'. Rather than being stigmatized as spinster, the new Singleton reached a state of cultural affirmation in which 'singleness' was celebrated as a lifestyle shaped by neoliberal discourses of individualization and the accommodation of the socio-political changes brought by 'second wave' feminism. In this context the Singleton, similar to other postfeminist identities analysed by Genz, is constructed in terms of professional success, financial independence, and personal freedom. Nevertheless, a central feature of this (neo-)liberal lifestyle is the desire to secure a heterosexual partnership and the need for the validation of the postfeminist self through means of heterosexual romance. Taylor points out how in this context choice, agency, and pleasure function as regulatory regimes that validate certain forms of femininities while disregarding (non-partnered) others: "the desirability of, and the centrality of the search for, a heterosexual partnership is ultimately reinscribed. The Singleton is a transient identity; an age and class specific subject position, eliding difference, while – as it is common in postfeminist popular narratives – celebrating and universalizing the search for a masculine other as an essential part of all women's lives" (p. 103).

To expand her argument, Taylor analyses in the following chapter how reality TV shows like *The Bachelor*, *The Farmer Wants a Wife*, and *Tough Love* inscribe a certain postfeminist logic onto their female contestants. These shows rest on specific discourses of make-over neo-liberalism that render the transformation of the outside as well as the inside via the help of 'experts' as a necessary pre-requisite for the procurement of a romantic, heterosexual relationship. Through tactics of (self-)surveillance, monitoring, and discipline, these TV formats render women's singleness as fundamentally undesirable and a problematic state of (feminine) being that can only be overcome by means of maximizing, bettering, reinventing, and self-governing.

Similarly, she argues in the next chapter, self-help manuals promote consumption, introspection, and self-labor as means to secure a male partner. Intimate entrepreneurship, based on engaging in emotional and psychological transformation, endows women with notions of power and agency, but actually contributes to the valorization of heterosexual coupledness.

Where Genz sets out to provide an account of the multifaceted forms postfemininities can take on, Taylor concentrates more on how female identity, relationship status and postfeminism are interwoven and negotiated in popular narratives from an intermedial perspective. Genz gives an insightful and readable account of the historical as well as epistemological development of the relationship between feminism and femininity from the 'second wave' to contemporary frames of postfeminism. However, her choice of authors and concepts is selective as she mainly discusses those that do rest on the victim-perpetrator dichotomy, thus not taking into account the multiple strands of feminism(s) that emerged during the 1960s and 70s. Additionally, both books have in common a focus on white, heterosexual, Western femininities that leaves questions of alternative representations of femininities and other forms of postfeminism(s) – specifically in non-Western contexts – unanswered. But both works offer a nuanced and complex reading of the selected cultural texts, escaping the pitfall that can be seen in other works on postfeminist identities of either dismissing or celebrating them. Both outline convincingly the critical, political dimensions of postfeminist representations while managing to point out their subversive, empowering potential.

In this regard Taylor's methodology makes her work very attractive, as she not only pays attention to the construction of women in the media but takes into account the subversive and emancipatory potential that emerges in the blogosphere when women are not constructed, but actively construct themselves as singles. By offering possibilities of 'rewriting oneself', she understands this virtual realm as a potentially oppositional field where conventional meanings are contested and negotiated. Emphasizing how self-generated content can provide the opportunities for discursive constructions of singleness that run counter to the narratives critiqued in the earlier chapters, Taylor succeeds in giving a well-rounded analysis of the construction of singleness throughout different media forms.

Genz also manages to outline how postfeminist characters are to some extent successful in re-thinking femininity as powerful and empowering. Postfeminism, she contends, offers "new meanings for old symbols", establishing "a space for the inventive and potentially subversive use of cultural signs and a refashioning of feminine identities" (p. 94). Nevertheless, her focus is also on the political implications of postfeminism, which she addresses by drawing attention to the embeddedness of 'pink power-feminism' in neo-liberal discourses of commodification and commercialization where women "are offered the promise of autonomy and endowed with the status of active agents by voluntarily objectifying themselves and actively choosing to employ their capacities in the pursuit of a feminine appearance and a sexualized image" (p. 95). This results in the construction of ambivalent, often contradictory identities that are caught in an emancipatory struggle of reclaiming the (post)feminist self (Negra 2009) in a social and cultural climate that still defines women in regard to reproductive ability, physical

attractiveness, and traditional femininity. Along this line Taylor also concludes that ultimately the Singleton remains within the boundaries of hegemonic femininity and does little to re-figure female identity outside the binaries of single or couple.

In summary, although the choice of selected cultural texts is in both books not truly original, sometimes overlapping with each other and/or other works on postfeminism (Henry 2004; McRobbie 2004; Gill 2007; Tasker and Negra 2007; Arthurs 2008; Taylor 2012), both present well-informed, balanced, and readable contributions to the question of how we can understand (single) postfemininities in popular culture.