

Exploring Postfeminist Subjectivities in Contemporary Hollywood

Franka Heise

Abstract:

Nadine Muller and Joel Gwynne's recent anthology *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* presents an insightful and multifaceted exploration of different key issues in critical postfeminist media studies. Divided into three parts, 'Postfeminist Femininities', 'Postfeminist Masculinities', and 'Postfeminism and Genre', the fourteen contributions chart the modes of postfeminist subject formation through different genres of Hollywood cinema. Through constant recourse to canonical texts, key theorists, and seminal works the different essays demonstrate a well-informed understanding of the current debates and discussions. The collection becomes a particularly valuable scholarly work through its interlacing of theoretical accounts and close readings of concrete media texts.

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Part I

The first part of the book discusses different forms of postfeminist subjectivities across different media texts. These include movies such as *The Kids Are All Right*, *Easy A*, *The House Bunny*, *It's Complicated*, and *Sex and the City 2*. Particularly Imelda Staehelin's article presents a valuable contribution as it introduces age as a critical category of difference in postfeminist identity formation, an issue that is often overlooked by many existing works. She outlines how 'the post-menopausal lover' is often depicted as an object of humor rather than desire and she outlines convincingly how in contemporary Hollywood cinema feminine aging is pathologized. Her account charts how postfeminism is being occupied with and valorizing youth(fullness) and glamour; it tends to centre on the age cohort between teenage girls and the 30-something women, while erasing the age specific and generational differences by which different subjectivities negotiate discourses of feminism and femininity.

Anna Moya provides discerning discussions of how borders and space intersect with and produce possibilities of postfeminist subjectivities. Vicki, Christina, Barcelona (2008) and *Eat Pray Love*(2010) serve here as examples of how postfeminist identity is produced in relation to space and borders. Moya discusses the notion of cosmopolitanism as a central feature of postfeminist subjectivity. In her account, cosmopolitanism offers the postfeminist subject a seemingly endless variety of possible subject positions. Being abroad encourages the postfeminist subject to reconstruct itself outside of well-known identity paradigms while simultaneously constrains it through culturally and geographically distinct borders and norms.

Particularly noteworthy is Clara Bradbury-Rance's contribution: it is one of the few publications that is concerned with the junctures between queerness and postfeminism. Exploring fruitfully the interstices between queerness and postfeminist normative inculcations, Bradbury-Rance elaborates how Hollywood cinema coopts queer identity through tropes of romanticism, consumerism, and domesticity in the postfeminist phantasmagoria. Compellingly she demonstrates that within postfeminist culture, non-heterosexual does not necessarily have to mean non-normative.

Part II

The second part of the book is particularly valuable as it significantly expands the existing academic discussions of postfeminist subjectivities to include masculinities. Hannah Hamad outlines in her article how fatherhood as a defining feature of hegemonic masculinity operates also as a key identity paradigm within the postfeminist context. She outlines how fatherhood has risen to discursive dominance, diagnosing a "paternalization" (p. 99) of contemporary Hollywood cinema. Fatherhood, she outlines, functions as "a common-sense veneer of postfeminist cultural logic" and now functions as "the paradigmatic template for ideal masculinity in postfeminist popular film culture" (p. 103). Particularly insightful is the genealogy she provides, charting the rise of fatherhood from the 1980s towards contemporary films such as *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Descendants*. Benjamin A. Brabon's essay provides another much needed contribution to the discussion of postfeminist masculinities. His essay introduces postfeminist masculinity as "a melting pot of masculinities, blending a variety of contested subject positions" (p. 117). He traces how different forms of 'neo' and 'retro' masculinities manifest themselves in complex subject configurations in the popular landscape. Providing a genealogy from the "bachelor to the postfeminist male Singleton", he contextualizes historically how key masculine identity categories have evolved since the middle of the last century, particularly in relation to neoliberalism, feminism, and changing gender roles.

Part III

Part three adds some insights into how postfeminism and different genre politics intersect. Helen Warner, for example, elaborates on the ways in which the 'chick flick' genre is interwoven with the politics of the postfeminist climate; Alexia L. Bowler on the other hand outlines the rise of new sexual conservatism in postfeminist romantic comedy. Katharina Linder investigates how the figure of the female athlete might challenge or reify cultural ideas of femininity, sexuality, and embodiment in sports films such as *Million Dollar Baby*, *Step Up*, and *Love and Basketball*. Martin Fradley investigates the entanglement of the teen horror genre with discourses of neoliberalism and feminism.

Conclusion

This book provides a thorough account of how different forms of postfeminist subjectivity manifest themselves in contemporary Hollywood cinema. It offers at the same time a critical understanding of postfeminism as a key "cultural condition" (p. 1). However, it fails, similar to many existing accounts, to discuss how this "cultural condition" intersects with and produces notions of class, race, and ability. Also, being occupied with Hollywood cinema and the US context, this book is another account that focuses on Western media texts and identity paradigms. Nevertheless this book advances the academic discussion of postfeminism significantly as it addresses some hitherto neglected key issues. By including masculinity, queerness, and genre as critical and important issues in postfeminist scholarship, the book expands significantly the body of existing postfeminist scholarship. Further, as this book also interrogates the

independent and avant-garde boundaries of commercial production, it extends the discussion beyond the mainstream staples of Hollywood cinema.