



Postfeminist Media Culture : Sensible Elements

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ABSTRACT

The notion of post-feminism has become one of the most important in the lexicon of feminist cultural analysis. Yet there is little agreement about what post-feminism is, and the term is used variously (and frequently contradictorily) to signal an epistemological break with (second wave) feminism, an historical shift (to a third wave), or a regressive political stance (backlash). The problem with these conceptualisations of post-feminism is the difficulty in specifying with any rigour what features constitute post-feminism. That is, they do not tell us what makes something (a media text, and audience reaction, a set of production values) postfeminist. The term is frequently invoked rhetorically, but lacks any analytic purchase.

In order to fashion a concept that can be used analytically within cultural studies, this paper argues that post-feminism is best understood as a distinctive sensibility, made up of a number of interrelated themes. These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference. Each of these is explored in some detail, with examples from contemporary Anglo-American media. It is precisely the patterned articulation of these ideas that constitutes a postfeminist sensibility. The paper then concludes with a discussion of the connection between this sensibility and the ideas and values of neoliberalism.

KEYWORDS : post-feminism, gender, neoliberalism

Introduction

The notion of post-feminism has become one of the most important and contested terms in the lexicon of feminist cultural analysis. In recent years debates about everything from the history and exclusion of feminism, to the gender consciousness (or otherwise) of young women, and the ideological nature of contemporary media have crystallized in disagreements about post-feminism. Like 'postmodernism' before it, the term has become overloaded with different meanings. As Dick Hebdige (1988) noted in relation to postmodernism, this is an indication that there is something worth struggling over. Arguments about post-feminism are debates about nothing less than the transformations in feminisms and transformations in media culture -- and their mutual relationship.

However, after nearly two decades of argument about post-feminism, there is still no agreement as to what it is, and the term is used variously and contradictorily to signal a theoretical position, a type of feminism after the second wave, or a regressive political stance. Such disagreement would not necessarily be cause for alarm (but might merely be a sign of vibrant debate) were it not for two additional problems: first, the difficulty of specifying with any rigour the features of post-feminism, and secondly the problems with applying current notions to any particular cultural or media analysis. What makes a text postfeminist? What features need to be present in order for any media scholar to label something postfeminist? In order to use the term post-feminism for analytic purposes, we need at a minimum to be able to specify the criteria used to identify something as postfeminist.

To this end, this paper aims to propose a new understanding of post-feminism that can be used to analyse contemporary cultural products. It seeks to argue that post-feminism is best thought of as a sensibility that characterizes increasing numbers of films, television shows, adverts and other media products. Elsewhere (Gill, 2006; Gill, forthcoming) I have discussed the theoretical basis for this conceptualization, highlighting the problems with the three dominant accounts of post-feminism which regard it as an epistemological/political position in the wake of feminism's encounter with 'difference' (Brooks, 1997; Alice, 1995; Yeatman 1994; Lotz, 2001); an historical shift within feminism (Hollows, 2000, 2003; Moseley and Read, 2002; Dow, 1996; Rabinowitz, 1999) or a backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1992; Whelehan, 2000; Williamson, 2003). Here, rather than defending the argument for considering post feminism as a sensibility, I want to begin the process of exploring and tentatively explicating the themes or features that characterize this sensibility. To do so, rather than staying close to the (relatively few) texts that have dominated discussions of post-feminism e.g. *Sex and the City*, *Ally McBeal*, *Desperate Housewives*, I will engage with examples from a range of different media - from talkshows to lad magazines, and from chick lit to advertising. I

hope to demonstrate the utility of the notion of post-feminism as a sensibility, and also to make a contribution to the task of unpacking postfeminist media culture.

Unpacking postfeminist media culture

This paper will argue that post feminism is best understood not as an epistemological perspective nor as an historical shift, and not (simply) as a backlash, in which its meanings are pre-specified. Rather, post-feminism should be conceived of as a sensibility. From this perspective postfeminist media culture should be our critical object -- a phenomenon into which scholars of culture should inquire -- rather than an analytic perspective. This approach does not require a static notion of one single authentic feminism as a comparison point, but instead is informed by postmodernist and constructionist perspectives and seeks to examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media.

This new notion emphasizes the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them. It also points to a number of other relatively stable features that comprise or constitute a postfeminist discourse. These include 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; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. These themes coexist and are structured by stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to 'race' and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability -- as well as gender.

Femininity as a bodily property

One of the most striking aspects of postfeminist media culture is its obsessive preoccupation with the body. In a shift from earlier representational practices it appears that femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than (say) a social structural or psychological one. Instead of caring or nurturing or motherhood being regarded as central to femininity (all, of course, highly problematic and exclusionary) in today's media it is possession of a 'sexy body' that is presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity. The body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgments of female attractiveness.

Indeed, surveillance of women's bodies (but not men's) constitutes perhaps the largest type of media content across all genres and media forms. Women's bodies are evaluated, scrutinized and dissected by

women as well as men, and are always at risk of 'failing'. This is most clear in the cultural obsession with celebrity, which plays out almost exclusively over women's bodies. Magazines like *Heat* offer page after page of big colour photographs of female celebrities' bodies, with scathing comments about anything from armpit hair to visible panty lines, but focusing in particular upon 'fat' and more recently in the censure that greets women deemed to be 'too thin'. So excessive and punitive is the regulation of women's bodies through this medium that conventionally attractive women can be indicted for having 'fat ankles' or 'laughter lines'. No transgression is seemingly too small to be picked over and picked apart by paparazzi photographers and writers. The tone of comments is frequently excoriating: e.g. 'yes that really is Melanie Griffith's wrinkly skin, not fabric' and 'there's so much fabric in Angelica Huston's dress it looks like it could be used to house small animals on cold nights. Despite that, it's straining overAnge's stomach and fits like a skintight bodysuit' (*Heat*, March 19, 2005)

Ordinary (i.e. non-celebrity) women are not exempt. Shows such as *What Not To Wear* and *10 Years Younger* subject women to hostile scrutiny for their bodies, postures and wardrobes, and evaluations that include the like of 'very saggy boobs' and 'what a minger'. Angela McRobbie notes the following comments from her viewing of *What Not To Wear*:

"What a dreary voice', 'look at how she walks', 'she shouldn't put that ketchup on her chips', 'she looks like a mousy librarian', 'her trousers are far too long', 'that jumper looks like something her granny crocheted, it would be better on the table', 'she hasn't washed her clothes', 'your hair looks like an overgrown poodle', 'your teeth are yellow, have you been eating grass?' And 'Oh my God she looks like a German lesbian'. (McRobbie 2004: 118)

McRobbie comments that this last insult was considered so hilarious that it was trailed as a promotion for the programme across the junctions of BBC TV for almost 2 weeks before it was broadcast. Importantly the female body in post feminist media culture is constructed as a window to the individual's interior life: for example, when *Bridget Jones* smokes 40 cigarettes a day or consumes 'excessive' calories we are invited to read this in psychological terms as indicative of her emotional breakdown. A sleek, toned, controlled figure is today normatively essential for portraying success. Yet there is also -- contradictorily -- an acknowledgement that the body is a canvas that affords an image which may have little to do with how one feels inside. For example, after their break-ups with Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise respectively, Nicole Kidman and Jennifer Aniston were heralded across the media as 'triumphant' when they each first appeared in public -- meaning that they successfully performed gleaming, commodified beauty and dazzling self-confidence, however hurt or vulnerable they may actually have felt. There was no comparable focus on the men.

The sexualisation of culture

Closely related to the intense focus on women's bodies as the site of femininity is the pervasive sexualisation of contemporary culture. By sexualisation I refer both to the extraordinary proliferation of discourses about sex and sexuality across all media forms, referred to by Brian McNair (2002) as part of the 'striptease culture' as well as to the increasingly frequent erotic presentation of girls', women's and (to a lesser extent) men's bodies in public spaces. Newspapers' use of rape stories as part of a package of titillating material is well documented, and in news media all women's bodies are available to be coded sexually- whether they are politicians, foreign correspondents or serious news anchors.

Different forms of sexualisation are also evident in popular magazines. In the 'ladmags' sex is discussed through a vocabulary of youthful, unselfconscious pleasure-seeking, whilst in magazines targeted at teenage girls and young women it is constructed as something requiring constant attention, discipline, self surveillance and emotional labour. Girls and women are interpellated as the monitors of all sexual and emotional relationships, responsible for producing themselves as desirable heterosexual subjects, as well as for pleasing men sexually, protecting against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, defending their own sexual reputations, and taking care of men's self-esteem. Men, by contrast, are hailed by the lad mags as hedonists just wanting 'a shag'. The uneven distribution of these discourses of sex, even in a resolutely heterosexual context, is crucial to understanding

sexualisation

(Tincknell et al, 2003; Gill, 2006). Put simply, in magazines aimed at straight women, men are presented as complex, vulnerable human beings. But in magazines targeted at those same men women only ever discuss their underwear, sexual fantasies, 'filthiest moments' or body parts (Turner, 2005)

The lad mags are emblematic of the blurring of the boundaries between pornography and other genres that has occurred in the last decade. 'Porno chic' has become a dominant representational practice in advertising, magazines, Internet sites and cable television. Even children's television has adopted a sexualised address to its audience and between its presenters. The commercially driven nature of this sexualisation can be seen in the way that clothing companies target girls as young as 5 with thongs (G strings), belly tops, and T-shirts bearing sexually provocative slogans e.g. 'when I'm bad I'm very, very bad, but when I'm in bed I'm better'. The use of the Playboy bunny icon on clothing, stationery and pencils aimed at the preteen market is but one example of the deliberate sexualisation of children (girls). The 'girlification' of adult women such as Kylie Minogue and Kate Moss is the flip side of a media culture that promotes female children as its most desirable sexual icons (see Tincknell 2005 for a nuanced discussion of this phenomenon)

From sex object to desiring sexual subject

Where once sexualized representations of women in the media presented them as passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze, today sexualisation works somewhat differently in many domains. Women are not straightforwardly objectified but are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so (Goldman, 1992). Nowhere is this clearer than in advertising which has responded to feminist critiques by constructing a new figure to sell to young women: the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is forever 'up for it'.

This shift is crucial to understanding the postfeminist sensibility. It represents a modernization of femininity to include what Hilary Radner has called a new 'technology of sexiness' in which sexual knowledge and sexual practice are central. Furthermore it represents a shift in the way that power operates: a shift from an external, male judging gaze to a self policing narcissistic gaze. I would argue that it represents a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification -- one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalised to form a new disciplinary regime. In this regime power is not imposed from above or from the outside, but constructs our very subjectivity. Girls and women are invited to become a particular kind of self, and endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy that is found in pornography. As Janice Turner has argued -

'Once porn and real human sexuality were distinguishable. Not even porn's biggest advocates would suggest a porn flick depicted reality, that women were gagging for sex 24/7 and would drop their clothes and submit to rough, anonymous sex at the slightest invitation. But as porn has seeped into mainstream culture, the line has blurred. To speak to men's magazine editors, it is clear they believe that somehow in recent years, porn has come true. The sexually liberated modern woman turns out to resemble -- what do you know! -- the pneumatic, take-me-now-big-boy fuck-puppet of male fantasy after all. (Turner, 2005: 2)

To be critical of the shift is not to be somehow 'anti-sex' -- though in postfeminist media culture this position (the prude) is the only alternative discursively allowed (itself part of the problem, and eradicating a space for critique). Rather it is to point to the dangers of such representations of women in a culture in which sexual violence is endemic, and to highlight the exclusions of this representational practice -- only some women are constructed as active, desiring sexual subjects: women who desire sex with men (except when lesbian women 'perform' for men) and only young, slim and beautiful women. As Myra Macdonald (1995) has pointed out, older women, bigger women, women with wrinkles, etc are never accorded sexual subjecthood and are still subject to offensive and sometimes vicious rep-

resentations. Indeed, the figure of the unattractive woman who wants a sexual partner remains one of the most vilified in a range of popular cultural forms. Above all, to critique this is to highlight the pernicious connection of this representational shift to neoliberal subjectivities in which sexual objectification can be (re-) presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects.

Individualism, choice and empowerment Notions of choice, of 'being oneself', and 'pleasing oneself' are central to the postfeminist sensibility that suffuses contemporary Western media culture. They resonate powerfully with the emphasis upon empowerment and taking control that can be seen in talk shows, advertising and makeover shows. A grammar of individualism underpins all these notions -- such that even experiences of racism or homophobia or domestic violence are framed in exclusively personal terms in a way that turns the idea of the personal as political on its head. Lois McNay (1992) has called this the deliberate 're-privatization' of issues that have only relatively recently become politicized.

One aspect of this postfeminist sensibility in media culture is the almost total evacuation of notions of politics or cultural influence. This is seen not only in the relentless personalizing tendencies of news, talk shows and reality TV, but also in the ways in which every aspect of life is refracted through the idea of personal choice and self-determination. For example, phenomenon such as the dramatic increase

in the number of women having Brazilian waxes (to entirely remove pubic hair and reinstate a prepubescent version of their genitalia) or the uptake of breast augmentation surgery by teenage girls are widely depicted as indicators of women 'pleasing themselves' and 'using beauty' to make themselves feel good. Scant attention is paid to the pressures that might lead a teenager to decide that major surgery will solve her problems, and even less to the commercial interests that are underpinning this staggering trend e.g. targeted advertising by cosmetic surgery clinics, and promotional packages that include mother and daughter special deals and discounts for two friends to have their 'boobs' done at the same time.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to outline the elements of a postfeminist sensibility, against a backdrop in which 'postfeminism' is routinely invoked but rarely explored or specified. Of necessity, this outline has been brief and schematic, highlighting a variety of themes that, taken together, constitute a distinctively postfeminist sensibility. I am conscious of having paid insufficient attention to differences of various kinds, and would be interested in exploring the extent to which a postfeminist sensibility recentres both heterosexuality and whiteness, as well as fetishising a young, able-bodied, 'fit' (understood as both healthy, and in its more contemporary sense as 'attractive') female body. The ways in which postfeminism marks a racialised and heterosexualised modernisation of femininity require much more analysis than was possible here.

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