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Postfeminist media culture

Elements of a sensibility

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ABSTRACT The notion of postfeminism has become one of the most important in the lexicon of feminist cultural analysis. Yet there is little agreement about what postfeminism is. This article argues that postfeminism 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 article concludes with a discussion of the connection between this sensibility and contemporary neoliberalism.

KEYWORDS *feminism, gender, media, neoliberalism, postfeminism*

Introduction

The notion of postfeminism 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 exclusions of feminism to the gender consciousness (or otherwise) of young women and the ideological nature of contemporary media, have crystallized in disagreements about postfeminism. As with '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 over which it is worth struggling. Arguments about postfeminism 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 postfeminism, 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 postfeminism; second, the problem of 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 as postfeminist? In order to use the term 'postfeminism' for analytical purposes, at minimum we need to be able to specify the criteria used to identify something as postfeminist.

To this end, this article aims to propose a new understanding of postfeminism which can be used to analyse contemporary cultural products. It seeks to argue that postfeminism is best thought of as a sensibility that characterizes increasing numbers of films, television shows, advertisements and other media products. Elsewhere (Gill, forthcoming) I have discussed the theoretical basis for this conceptualization, highlighting the problems of three dominant accounts of postfeminism which regard it as an epistemological or political position in the wake of feminism's encounter with 'difference' (Alice, 1995; Brooks, 1997; Lotz, 2001; Yeatman, 1994), an historical shift within feminism (Dow, 1996; Hollows, 2000, 2003; Moseley and Read, 2002; Rabinovitz, 1999) or as a backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1992; Whelehan, 2000; Williamson, 2003). Rather than defending the argument for considering postfeminism as a sensibility, this article begins 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 postfeminism, such as *Sex And The City*, *Ally McBeal* and *Desperate Housewives*, it will engage with examples from a range of different media – from talk shows to lad magazines, and from 'chick lit' to advertising. It hopes to demonstrate the utility of the notion of postfeminism as a sensibility, and to contribute to the task of unpacking postfeminist media culture.

Unpacking postfeminist media culture

This article will argue that postfeminism is understood best neither as an epistemological perspective nor as an historical shift, nor (simply) as a backlash in which its meanings are pre-specified. Rather, postfeminism 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 sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. These themes coexist with, 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 a social, structural or psychological one. Instead of regarding caring, nurturing or motherhood as central to femininity (all of course highly problematic and exclusionary), in today's media, possession of a 'sexy body' 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 unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and re-modelling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever-narrower judgements of female attractiveness.

Indeed, surveillance of women's bodies 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 such as *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, censoring 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 too small to be picked over and picked apart by paparazzi photographers and writers. The tone of comments is frequently excoriating: '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 over Anje's stomach and fits like a skintight bodysuit' (*Heat*, 19 March 2005).



Ordinary (non-celebrity) women are not exempt. TV programmes such as *What Not To Wear* and *10 Years Younger* subject women to hostile scrutiny for their bodies, postures and wardrobes, and evaluations including the like of 'very saggy boobs' and 'what a minger'. Angela McRobbie notes the following 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, 2004a: 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 two weeks before it was broadcast. Importantly, the female body in postfeminist media culture is constructed as a window to the individual's interior life. For example, in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding, 1997) 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. Today, a sleek, toned, controlled figure is normatively essential for portraying success. Yet there is also – contradictorily – an acknowledgement that the body is a canvas affording 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 actually may have felt. There was no comparable focus on the men.

The sexualization of culture

The intense focus on women's bodies as the site of femininity is closely related to the pervasive sexualization of contemporary culture. Sexualization here refers 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 the 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 sexualization are evident also in popular magazines. In the 'lad mags', sex is discussed through a vocabulary of youthful, unself-conscious pleasure-seeking, while 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 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 as hedonists just wanting 'a shag'. The uneven distribution of these discourses of sex, even in a resolutely heterosexual context, is crucial to understanding sexualization (Gill, 2006; Tincknell et al., 2003). 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 magazines are emblematic of the blurring of the boundaries between pornography and other genres which 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 sexualized address to its audience and between its presenters. The commercially-driven nature of this sexualization can be seen in the way that clothing companies target girls as young as five with thongs (G-strings), belly tops and T-shirts bearing sexually provocative slogans, such as '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 pre-teen market is but one example of the deliberate sexualization of children (girls). The 'girlification' of adult women such as Kylie Minogue and Kate Moss is the flipside of a media culture that promotes female children as its most desirable sexual icons.¹

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 sexualization works somewhat differently in many domains. Women are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed 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' (Radner, 1999) in which sexual knowledge and practice are central. Furthermore, it represents a shift in the way that power operates: from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing, narcissistic gaze. It can be argued that this represents a higher



or deeper form of exploitation than objectification – one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime. In this regime, power is not imposed from above or the outside, but constructs our very subjectivity. Girls and women are invited to become a particular kind of self, and are endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy 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)

The humorous tone that characterized early examples of this shift – the amusing bra adverts in which billboard models confidently and playfully highlighted their sexual power or traffic-stopping sexiness – should not imply that this shift is not, in fact, profoundly serious and problematic. In the last decade it has gone from being a new and deliberate representational strategy used on women (i.e. for depicting young women) to being widely and popularly taken up by women as a way of constructing the self. For example, TV presenter Denise van Outen 'confides' in a TV interview, 'I do have a lovely pair. I hope they'll still be photographing my tits when I'm 60'; 'readers' wives' write in to lad magazines with their favourite sexual experiences: 'he turned me around, bent me over the railings and took me from behind, hard'; and girls and women in the West queue up to buy T-shirts with slogans such as 'Porn Star', 'Feuk Me' and 'Fit Chick, Unbelievable Knockers'.

To be critical of the shift is not to be somehow 'anti-sex' – although in postfeminist media culture this position (the prude) is the only alter-native discursively allowed (itself part of the problem, eradicating a space for critique).² 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 representations. 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, 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 ‘reprivatization’ of issues which have become politicized only relatively recently.

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, phenomena such as the dramatic increase in the number of women having Brazilian waxes (to remove pubic hair entirely and re-instate a prepubescent version of their genitalia) or the uptake of breast augmentation surgery by teenage girls, are depicted widely 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, such as targeted advertising by cosmetic surgery clinics and promotional packages which include mother and daughter special deals and discounts for two friends to have their ‘boobs’ done at the same time.

The notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses, which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever. As Kate Taylor puts it, twentysomething women

already see themselves as equal to men: they can work, they can vote, they can bonk on the first date ... if a thong makes you feel fabulous, wear it. For one thing, men in the office waste whole afternoons staring at your bottom, placing bets on whether you’re wearing underwear. Let them. Use that time to take over the company. But even if you wear lingerie for you, for no other reason than it makes you feel good, that is reason enough to keep it on. (Taylor, 2006).

In this account, two versions of the empowered female subject are presented. In one, women deliberately use their sexual power to distract men so as to take over the business while the guys are salivating. In the other,



women are depicted as simply following their own desires to 'feel good'. This latter theme of pleasing oneself is by far the more common and is captured in this decade-old comment from Fay Weldon:

Young girls seem to be getting prettier all the time. There is a return to femininity, but it seems to me that most girls don't give two hoots about men. It is about being fit and healthy for *themselves* not for men. (Narayan, 1996: 13; emphasis in original)

Of course the idea that in the past women dressed in a particular way purely to please men is ridiculous: it suggests a view of power as something both overbearing and obvious, which acted upon entirely docile subjects – as well as implying that all women are heterosexual and preoccupied with male approval. But this pendulum shift to the notion that women just 'please themselves' will not do as a substitute. It presents women as entirely free agents and cannot explain why – if women are just pleasing themselves and following their own autonomously generated desires – the resulting valued 'look' is so similar – hairless body, slim waist, firm buttocks, etc. Moreover, it simply avoids all the interesting and important questions about the relationship between representations and subjectivity, the difficult but crucial questions about how socially-constructed, mass-mediated ideals of beauty are internalized and made our own.

What is striking is the degree of fit between the autonomous postfeminist subject and the psychological subject demanded by neoliberalism. At the heart of both is the notion of the 'choice biography' and the contemporary injunction to render one's life knowable and meaningful through a narrative of free choice and autonomy, however constrained one actually might be (Rose, 1996; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Take this typical example from *Glamour's* 'Relationtips' column, October 2005:

It is possible to make the euphoria of the first date last. In the early weeks, says Balfour, it's best to be the first to end the date. 'It leaves him wanting more.' Then remember the golden rules: don't talk endlessly about your ex, be bitter about men or moan about your awful job/family/life. Most men agree a confident, secure, optimistic and happy woman is easier to fall in love with than a needy, neurotic one. 'It's not about "I need to be more sexy for him and he'll love me more", it's about being confident in yourself.'

Here – as in *Bridget Jones's Diary* and in 'chick lit' more generally – achieving desirability in a heterosexual context is explicitly (re-)presented as something done for yourself, not in order to please a man. In this modernized, neoliberal version of femininity, it is absolutely imperative that one's sexual and dating practices be presented as freely chosen (however traditional, old-fashioned or inegalitarian they may be – involving strict adherence to rules, rationing oneself and not displaying any needs). In this example, some of the strain of this position – the messy suturing of traditional and neoliberal discourses – can be seen very clearly in both the need to disavow explicitly a potential reading that 'you' would be doing



this to please a man, and the attempt to gloss 'leaving him wanting more' somehow as a modern and powerful position.

Self-surveillance and discipline

Intimately related to the stress upon personal choice is the new emphasis on self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-discipline in postfeminist media culture. Arguably, monitoring and surveying the self have long been requirements of the performance of successful femininity – with instruction in grooming, attire, posture, elocution and 'manners' being 'offered' to women to allow them to emulate more closely the upper-class white ideal. In women's magazines femininity has been portrayed always as contingent – requiring constant anxious attention, work and vigilance, from touching up your make-up to packing the perfect capsule wardrobe, from hiding 'unsightly' pimples, wrinkles, age spots or stains to hosting a successful dinner party. However, what marks out the present moment as distinctive are three features. First, the dramatically increased intensity of self-surveillance, indicating the intensity of the regulation of women (alongside the disavowal of such regulation). Second, the extensiveness of surveillance over entirely new spheres of life and intimate conduct. Third, the focus upon the psychological – the requirement to transform oneself and remodel one's interior life.

Something of the intensity and extensiveness of the self-surveillance and discipline now normatively required of women can be seen in women's magazines in which bodily shape, size, muscle tone, attire, sexual practice, career, home, finances, etc. are rendered into 'problems' that necessitate ongoing and constant monitoring and labour. Yet, in an extraordinary ideological sleight of hand, this labour must be understood nevertheless as 'fun', 'pampering' or 'self-indulgence' and must *never* be disclosed. Magazines offer tips to girls and young women to enable them to continue the work of femininity but still appear as entirely confident, carefree and unconcerned about their self-presentation (as this is now an important aspect of femininity in its own right); for example, the solution to continuing a diet while at an important business lunch where everyone else is drinking is to order a spritzer (and surreptitiously ask the waiter to make it largely mineral water). *J17* includes the following advice to girls texting a 'lad love':

Do: be flirtatious – no lad can resist an ego massage; text him before he goes to bed – you'll be the last thing on his mind; put in a deliberate mistake to give it that "I'm not so bothered aboutcha" air; wait a minimum of 10 minutes before you reply – yes, 10 minutes! (*J17*, March 2001)

From sending a brief text message to ordering a drink, no area of a woman's life is immune from the requirement to self-survey and work on the self. More and more aspects of the body come under surveillance: you thought you were comfortable with your body? Well think again! When



was the last time you checked your ‘upper arm definition’? Have you been neglecting your armpits or the soles of your feet? Do you sometimes have (ahem) unpleasant odours?

But it is not only the surface of the body that needs ongoing vigilance – there is also the self: what kind of friend, lover, daughter or colleague are you? Do you laugh enough? How well do you communicate? Have you got emotional intelligence? In a culture saturated by individualistic self-help discourses, the self has become a project to be evaluated, advised, disciplined and improved or brought ‘into recovery’. However, what is so striking is how unevenly distributed these quasi-therapeutic discourses are. In magazines, contemporary fiction and television talk shows, it is women, not men, who are addressed and required to work on and transform the self. Significantly, it appears that the ideal disciplinary subject of neoliberalism is feminine.

The makeover paradigm

More broadly, it might be argued that a makeover paradigm constitutes postfeminist media culture. This requires people (predominantly women) to believe, first, that they or their life is lacking or flawed in some way; second, that it is amenable to reinvention or transformation by following the advice of relationship, design or lifestyle experts and practising appropriately modified consumption habits. Not only is this the implicit message of many magazines, talk shows and other media content, but it is the explicit focus of the ‘makeover takeover’ (Hollows, 2000) that dominates contemporary television. It began with food, homes and gardens, but has now extended to clothing, cleanliness, work, dating, sex, cosmetic surgery and raising children.

Such shows begin with the production of ‘toxic shame’ (Peck, 1995) in their participants through humiliation – inadequacies in the wardrobe, cleanliness, dating or childrearing department, alongside the gleeful and voyeuristic display of their failings to the audience (“Oh my GOD – what is THAT? No, NO! What’s she DOING?!”). Participants are then variously advised, cajoled, bullied or ‘educated’ into changing their ways and becoming more ‘successful’ versions of themselves (looking younger, getting past the first date, having a better relationship with their children, etc.). A frequent ‘third chapter’ of the show’s format allows the hapless victim to be set free to ‘go it alone’ (on a date or buying clothes) while, behind the watchful eye of the hidden camera, the ‘experts’ offer their judgements.

As Helen Wood and Beverly Skeggs (2004) have argued, the ubiquity of such shows produce ‘new ethical selves’ in which particular forms of modernized and upgraded selfhood are presented as solutions to the dilemmas of contemporary life. The scenarios are profoundly classed and gendered and, as Angela McRobbie (2004a) points out, racialized too (if largely through exclusion), since the kind of hostile judgements



routinely made of white working-class women would risk being heard as racist if made by white experts about black bodies, practices and lives. The shows reinvigorate class antagonisms which, in this moment of compulsory individuality, no longer work on such 'crude' categories as occupation or social location, but play out on the women's bodies, homes, cooking skills and ability as mothers, through notions of good taste and cultural capital:

Choice mediates taste, displaying the success and the failure of the self to make itself, for instance in lifestyle programmes such as *Changing Rooms* (BBC), *House Doctor* (Channel 4) and *Better Homes* (ITV) where the domestic and thus the everyday is transformed through appropriating 'better' taste. (Wood and Skeggs, 2004: 206)

McRobbie points to the appalling nastiness and viciousness of the gendered and class animosities enacted, as the audience is encouraged to laugh at those less fortunate. However, in a programme such as *Wife Swap*, in which two married women (usually from dramatically different class backgrounds) swap lives, the orchestrated morality is sometimes more complicated, with middle-class 'career women' the target of attack for devoting too little time or attention to their children (alongside the attacks on working-class women's poor food preparation or incompetence at helping with homework, which McRobbie describes). What is clear from even a cursory viewing of such shows is that women simply cannot win; inevitably, they will always 'fail'. But rather than interrogating femininity or social relations, or what we as a society expect of women, the shows offer no way of understanding this other than through the dramatized spectacle of conflict between two women.

As has been noted previously, most of the participants and a large part of the assumed audience for makeover shows are women. One exception is *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, in which 'five gay professionals in fashion, grooming, interior design, culture, food and wine come together as a team to help straight men of the world find the job, get the look and get the girl' (executive producer, quoted in Allatson, 2004: 209). Here, gay men occupy an explicitly feminized position, offering advice based on their cultural capital as wealthy, successful, middle-class and, above all, stylish. There is no space here to reflect on the debates about the show, such as its elision or equation of gayness with stylishness, its eradication of any female 'queer' perspectives, and its role in bolstering and maintaining a heterosexist economy. But it is worth pointing to the difference in tone between this show and similar formats aimed at transforming women – in particular, the ironic distance and lack of a sense of punitive regulation that marks out *Queer Eye*. This is also notable in other shows featuring male participants: they are marked in subtle ways as 'less serious' and as offering a kind of symbolic revenge against men. This can be seen most clearly in the now iconic moment in each show (such as *10 Years Younger*) in which male



'victims' are told that they must have their back (or sometimes chest) hair removed. This procedure is lingered over by the camera in a way that seems designed to appeal to female viewers, for whom waxing or electrolysis is assumed to be routine. The 2005 box-office hit *Hitch*, in which Will Smith plays a life and relationship coach to the sweet but inept Kevin James, features a similar scene, while also being wrapped in a narrative that reassures male viewers that such self-transformations are not really necessary: being oneself (unmade-over) is all that is required to win the woman's heart, and 'authentic masculinity' wins the day.

The reassertion of sexual difference

For a short time in the 1970s and 1980s, notions of male and female equality and the basic similarity of men and women took hold in popular culture, before this was resolutely dispensed with in the 1990s. A key feature of the postfeminist sensibility has been the resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference across all media from newspapers to advertising, talk shows and popular fiction. One arena in which this played out was the media debate about masculinity, in which the figure of the 'New Man' was attacked by both women and men as asexual and not manly enough. New man was condemned as inauthentic and fake, and understood by many as an act or pose that had arisen through what was presented as the hegemonic dominance of feminism, but had little to do with what men were actually like. Against this, the rise of the 'New Lad' in the 1990s was widely reported as an assertion of freedom against the stranglehold of feminism and – crucially – as an unashamed celebration of true or authentic masculinity, liberated from the shackles of 'political correctness'. New lad championed and reasserted a version of masculinity as libidinous, powerful and, crucially, different from femininity.

Importantly, these discourses of sexual difference were nourished both by the growing interest in evolutionary psychology, and developments in genetic science which held out the promise of locating a genetic basis for all human characteristics. Such developments, from concern about the existence of a 'gay gene' to attempts to identify the parts of the brain responsible for risk-taking (and to demonstrate that they were larger in men than in women), were accorded a huge amount of coverage in the press and on television, and it is significant that this interest coincided with a moment in which the lifestyle sections of newspapers were expanding and proliferating, filled in large part by articles focusing on the nature of gender and gender relations (see Gill, 2006).

In addition, notions of sexual difference were fed by the explosion of self-help literature which addressed – at least as its subtext – the question of why the 'battle of the sexes' continued despite (or, in some iterations, because of) feminism. One answer rang out loud and clearly from many texts: because men and women are fundamentally different. Feminism was deemed to have lost its way when it tried to impose its ideological



prescriptions on a nature that did not fit; what was needed, such literature argued, was a frank acknowledgement of difference rather than its denial. Spearheading the movement (or at least the publishing phenomenon) was John Gray, whose 'Mars and Venus' text (2002) soon became a whole industry. Gray's genius was in locating sexual difference as a psychological rather than essentially biological matter, and transposing old and cliched notions through the new and fresh metaphor of interplanetary difference, while (superficially at least) avoiding blame and criticism (a closer reading tells a different story).

Gray's work has become an important part of postfeminist media culture in its own right, as well as in its citations in other popular cultural texts from magazines to 'chick lit', and its inauguration of the notion of (interplanetary) translation. The idea (also found in more expressly feminist texts such as Deborah Tannen's (1992) work on language), is that men and women just do not understand each other. A large role for the popular media, then, is translating or mediating men's and women's communication, customs and 'funny ways' to each other (in a manner, one could argue, that still systematically privileges male power).

Discourses of sexual difference also serve to (re-)eroticize power relations between men and women. On one level this simply means that difference is constructed as sexy. On another, discourses of natural gender difference can be used to freeze in place existing inequalities by representing them as inevitable and – if read correctly – as pleasurable.

Irony and knowingness

No discussion of the postfeminist sensibility in the media would be complete without considering irony and knowingness. Irony can serve many functions. It is used in advertising to address what Goldman (1992) calls 'sign fatigue', by hailing audiences as knowing and sophisticated consumers, flattering them with their awareness of intertextual references and the notion that they can 'see through' attempts to manipulate them. Irony is used also as a way of establishing a safe distance between oneself and particular sentiments or beliefs, at a time when being passionate about anything or appearing to care too much seems to be 'uncool'. As Ian Parker has noted in relation to declarations of love, the postmodern and ironic version of 'I love you' might be, 'as Barbara Cartland would say, "I love you madly"' (Parker, 1989: 157). Here the quotation or reference sets up a protective distance between the speaker and the expression of love. Jackson et al. (2001) have argued that irony may offer an internal defence against ambivalent feelings, as well as outwardly rebutting charges of taking something (or worse still, oneself) too seriously.

Most significantly, however, in postfeminist media culture irony has become a way of 'having it both ways', of expressing sexist, homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form, while claiming this was not actually 'meant'. It works in various ways. As Whelehan (2000)



and Williamson (2003) have argued, the use of retro imagery and nostalgia is a key device in the construction of contemporary sexism. Referencing a previous era becomes an important way of suggesting that the sexism is safely sealed in the past while constructing scenarios that would garner criticism if they were represented as contemporary. In the recent '*Happy Days*' advert for Citroen C3 cars, for example, the first frame shows a young woman having her dress entirely ripped off her body to reveal her bright red underwear (which matches the car). She screams, but the action soon moves on as the interest is in her body, not her distress. The 1950s iconography and soundtrack from the *Happy Days* show protects the advert from potential criticism: it is as if the whole thing is in ironic and humorous quotation marks.

The return and rehabilitation of the word 'totty' in popular culture marks another example of this, allowing middle-class television presenters to refer to women in an entirely dehumanizing and objectifying manner, while suggesting that the sexism is not meant seriously. The word has a nostalgic quality, redolent of 'naughty' seaside postcards.

Irony can operate through 'silly' neologisms. This happens routinely in the lads' magazines. For example, in evaluating photographs of readers' girlfriends' breasts, *FHM* makes such comments as 'if we're being fussy, right chesticle is a tad larger than the left' – the sheer silliness of the term 'chesticle' raises a smile so that one might almost overlook the fact that this is a competition ('breast quest') to find the 'best pair of tits' in Britain (in 2005).

Irony also functions through the very extremeness of the sexism expressed: as though the mere fact that women are compared to 'rusty old bangers' or posed against each other in the 'dumbest girlfriend' competition is (perversely) evidence that there is no sexism (the extremeness of the sexism is evidence that there is no sexism). Magazine editors routinely trot out the line that it is all 'harmless fun' (when did 'harmless' and 'fun' become yoked together so powerfully?). And some academic commentators agree. David Gauntlett argues that the sexism in such magazines is 'knowingly ridiculous, based on the assumption that it's silly to be sexist (and therefore is funny in a silly way)' (2002: 168).

Yet if we suspend our disbelief in the notion that it is 'just a laugh', we are left with a fast-growing area of media content (which profoundly influences other media) that is chillingly misogynist, inviting men to evaluate women only as sexual objects. A recent issue of *FHM* asks men: 'How much are you paying for sex?' Readers are invited to calculate their 'outgoings' on items such as drinks, cinema tickets and bunches of flowers, and then to divide the total by the number of 'shags' they've had that month in order to calculate their 'pay per lay'. Under a fiver per shag is 'too cheap – she is about the same price as the Cambodian whore'; around £11 to £20 is 'about the going rate for a Cypriot tart', and each shag should be compared with the value and pleasure to be obtained from purchasing a new CD.



Any more expensive than this and the lad should expect a performance worthy of a highly-trained, sexy showgirl (Turner, 2005).

It is hard to imagine any other group in society being so systematically objectified, attacked and vilified with so little opposition – which tells us something about the power of irony. Any attempt to offer a critique of such articles is dismissed by references to the critic's presumed ugliness, stupidity or membership of the 'feminist thought police'. Frequently, criticisms are pre-empted by comments which suggest that the article's writer is expecting 'blundering rants' from the 'council of women'. In this context, critique becomes much more difficult – and this, it would seem, is precisely what is intended.

Feminism and anti-feminism

Finally, this article will turn to constructions of feminism, which are an integral feature of the postfeminist sensibility considered here. One of the things that makes the media today very different from the television, magazines, radio or press of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, is that feminism is now part of the cultural field. That is, feminist discourses are expressed within the media rather than simply being external, independent, critical voices. Feminist-inspired ideas burst forth from our radios, television screens and print media in TV discussions about date rape and sexualized imagery, in newspaper articles about women's experiences of war or the increasing beauty pressures on young girls, in talk shows about domestic violence or anorexia. Indeed, it might be argued that much of what counts as feminist debate in western countries today takes place in the media rather than outside it.

However, it would be entirely false to suggest that the media has somehow become feminist and has adopted unproblematically a feminist perspective. Instead it seems more accurate to argue that the media offers contradictory, but nevertheless patterned, constructions. In this postfeminist moment, as Judith Stacey (1987) has put it, feminist ideas are simultaneously 'incorporated, revised and depoliticised', and – let us add here – attacked. Angela McRobbie (2004b) has referred to this as the contemporary 'double entanglement' of neoliberal values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life, and a feminism that is part of common sense yet also feared, hated and fiercely repudiated.

What makes contemporary media culture distinctively postfeminist, rather than pre-feminist or anti-feminist, is precisely this entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas. This can be seen clearly in the multimillion dollar publishing phenomenon of 'chick lit' in the wake of the success of *Bridget Jones's Diary*. In contemporary screen and paperback romances, feminism is not ignored or even attacked (as some backlash theorists might have it), but is simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated. A certain kind of liberal feminist perspective is treated as commonsense, while at the same time feminism and feminists are constructed as harsh,



punitive and inauthentic, not articulating women's true desires (Tasker and Negra, 2005). In some instances feminism is set up as policeman, disallowing women the pleasures of traditional femininity. In a recent interview, Marian Keyes, author of a series of successful 'chick lit' novels, refers to herself as part of a 'postfeminist generation' that grew up in fear of being 'told off' by feminists and 'having everything pink taken out of my house' (*Start the Week*, BBC Radio 4, 7 June 2004). This caricature captures well what Esther Sonnet has called the 'naughty but nice' effect, where 'disapproval from Big Sister intensifies the secret/guilty pleasures offered to the "postfeminist" consumer of the forbidden pleasures of the unreconstructed "feminine"' (Sonnet, 2002: 193).

Perhaps this also relates to the pleasures of the sexism in lad magazines, targeted as they are at men 'who should know better' (to use *Loaded's* strapline). It is precisely the knowingness of the 'transgression', alongside the deliberate articulation of feminist and anti-feminist ideas, that signifies a postfeminist sensibility.

In such romances, postfeminist heroines are often much more active protagonists than their counterparts in popular culture from the 1970s and 1980s. They value autonomy, bodily integrity and the freedom to make individual choices. However, what is interesting is the way in which they seem compelled to use their empowered postfeminist position to make choices that would be regarded by many feminists as problematic, located as they are in normative notions of femininity. They choose, for example, white weddings, downsizing, giving up work or taking their husband's name on marriage (McRobbie, 2004b). One reading of this may highlight the exclusions of Second Wave feminism, suggesting that it represents the 'return of the repressed'; the pleasures of domesticity or traditional femininity (Hollows, 2003). Another (not necessarily contradictory) reading might want to stress the ways in which pre-feminist ideals are being (seductively) repackaged as postfeminist freedoms (Probyn, 1997) in ways that do nothing to question normative heterosexual femininity. Two things are clear, however: postfeminism constructs an articulation or suture between feminist and anti-feminist ideas, and this is effected entirely through a grammar of individualism that fits perfectly with neoliberalism.

Conclusion

This article 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



re-centres both heterosexuality and whiteness, as well as fetishizing 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 racialized and heterosexualized modernization of femininity require much more analysis than was possible here. In conclusion, however, this article highlights two key points about the sensibility sketched here: its intimate relation to feminism and to neoliberalism.

What makes a postfeminist sensibility quite different from both pre-feminist constructions of gender and feminist ones, is that it is clearly a response to feminism. In this sense, postfeminism articulates a distinctively new sensibility. Some writers have understood this as a backlash (Faludi, 1992; Whelehan, 2000; Williamson, 2003) but one could argue that it is more complex than this, precisely because of its tendency to entangle feminist and anti-feminist discourses. Feminist ideas are at the same time articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed. Its constructions of contemporary gender relations are profoundly contradictory. On the one hand, young women are hailed through a discourse of 'can-do girl power', yet on the other hand, their bodies are powerfully reinscribed as sexual objects; women are presented as active, desiring social subjects, but they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance which has no historical precedent.

Yet these contradictions are not random, but contain the sediments of other discourses in a way that is patterned and amenable to elaboration – much as this article has tried to do. It is precisely in the apparent contradictions of the postfeminist sensibility that the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist discourses can be seen. The patterned nature of the contradictions is what constitutes the sensibility, one in which notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the 'wrong' 'choices' (become too fat, too thin or have the audacity or bad judgement to grow older).

These notions are also central to neoliberalism and suggest a profound relation between neoliberal ideologies and postfeminism. In recent years a number of writers have explored neoliberalism in order to highlight the ways in which it has shifted from being a political or economic rationality to a mode of governmentality that operates across a range of social spheres (Brown, 2003; Rose, 1996). Neoliberalism is understood increasingly as constructing individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating. The individual must bear full responsibility for their life biography, no matter how severe the constraints upon their action.

However, what has not yet been examined is the relationship of neoliberalism to gender relations. But it appears from this attempt to map the elements of a postfeminist sensibility that there is a powerful resonance between postfeminism and neoliberalism. This operates on at least three levels. First, and most broadly, both appear to be structured



by a current of individualism that has replaced almost entirely notions of the social or political, or any idea of the individual as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves. Second, it is clear that the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism. These two parallels suggest, then, that postfeminism is not simply a response to feminism but also a sensibility at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas. Third, however, is a connection which might imply that the synergy is even more significant: in the popular cultural discourses examined here, *women* are called on to self-manage and self-discipline. To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, regulate every aspect of their conduct, and present their actions as freely chosen. Could it be that neoliberalism is always already gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects? Further exploration of this intimate relationship is needed urgently to illuminate both postfeminist media culture and contemporary neoliberal social relations.

Notes

1. See Tincknell (2005) for a nuanced discussion of this phenomenon.
2. The language of feminism's sex wars is also unhelpful in this respect, counterposing the 'anti-pornography' feminists with the 'sex positive' feminists, with the implication that those who are against pornography are somehow less than positive about sex.

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