

## Remaking Feminism: Or Why Is Postfeminism So Boring?

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This article poses questions which have exercised me over the past few years, partly because of my work with chick lit and other popular fiction, partly as a result of my experience of viewing and teaching chick flick film adaptations, and also because of my interests in the development of Second Wave feminist thought.<sup>1</sup> The motivation to actually try to make sense of and connect these ideas came about in response to watching the recent remake of *The Women* (2008). This film might be viewed as an adaptation of both Cukor's classic 1939 film and Clare Boothe's 1936 play, which itself experienced a Broadway revival in 2002, starring *Sex and the City*'s Cynthia Nixon. The proximity of this film's appearance to the release of the film adaptation of *Sex and the City* (2008), invited comparisons between the two which yielded much common ground; in addition to these I will also reflect upon the remake of *The Stepford Wives* (Frank Oz, 2004; also a novel by Ira Levin, 1972) which again utilises a successful text from a previous era to arguably postfeminist ends.

In recent years a number of commentators<sup>2</sup> have revisited the scope and meanings of post-feminism as well as examining its successful deployment in mass cultural texts. The three films mentioned above are being used here as representative examples of the deployment of discourses of postfeminism in popular forms and suggest that a new generation of chick flicks are capitalising on a significant proportion of

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<sup>1</sup> See *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (2000) and *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City* (2005).

<sup>2</sup> See for example Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (eds), *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (2007); Roberta Garrett, *Postmodern Chick Flicks: The Return of the Women's Film* (2007); Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (2009).

mature female cinema-goers, witnessed by the themes and characters developed which extend the boy-meets-girl theme of traditional romance, and tackle issues of gender politics in the workplace, mothering, sexual choices and the importance of female friendship. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker's *Interrogating Postfeminism* (2007) and Negra's later book, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (2009), are examples of texts which have offered thorough and cogent analyses of the meanings and uses of postfeminism in popular culture, so I will restrict myself to a brief overview of the key features of postfeminist discourse in subsequent paragraphs, the better to frame my discussion of the films in question.

Generally, postfeminist discourse is characterised as deploying what might be regarded as broadly "feminist" sentiments in order to justify certain behaviours or choices, but these sentiments have become severed from their political or philosophical origins. Postfeminism in popular culture displays a certain schizophrenia in the way women are often portrayed as enormously successful at work and simultaneously hopelessly anxious about their intimate relationships, over which they often have little control or for which they seek continuous self-improvement. The world of work is generally portrayed as allowing female success, but there are glimpses of sexism which present enough problems that women have to solve for themselves or in consultation with their close girlfriends; beauty, fashion and adornment remain highly prized as part of the arsenal of the high-achieving woman, so that postfeminism equates with excessive consumption, while at the same time expressing sentiments of empowerment and female capability. The things that make women miserable are often covertly laid at the door of feminism and can be summarised thus: "feminism gave women social equality, choices and freedoms, but those choices have emotional costs which individual women are constantly trying to resolve and balance." It is feminism, then, that is positioned as creating the most significant challenges for postmodern women, even though all that feminism did was to foreground the reality that the traditional feminine sphere of the home remains painfully exclusive from the world of work and almost entirely the domain of women.

Popular cultural texts, whether fictional, televisual or filmic, replay these contradictions continually and in the repetition some interesting patterns emerge. I shall further explore this through the above textual

examples and in the light of recent theoretical accounts of postfeminism, in order to suggest ways in which we might rethink the relationship between postfeminism and feminism and question the meanings that postfeminist discourse can now have.

There are a large number of recent films that might be dubbed postfeminist chick flicks; the three I have chosen are all “remaking” and adapting texts which have previously been successful, although the remakes have had varying degrees of success, with *The Women* disappearing from view almost immediately after cinematic release. In transforming their textual “origins” (whether that be novel, play, TV series or film) each adaptation presents some unresolved tensions in the representation of adult women in popular culture. In different ways each of these films at once ventriloquises feminist issues and values whilst shying away from endorsing feminism or any kind of oppositional ideology; in their focus on the body, ageing, motherhood, consumerism as self definition and female professional success the discourse of postfeminism presented offers nostalgic reimaginings of the past which evade feminist historicisation. For *Sex and the City*, there is also audience-induced nostalgia for the television series (aired from 1998-2004);<sup>3</sup> in *The Women* the nostalgic focus is on domestic retreat and the dream of finding a job compatible with motherhood (self-employment is the key, apparently). In *The Stepford Wives* domesticity figures as a dystopian threat to contemporary women’s freedom, corrected by a new understanding between seeming “equal” partners, but at some cost to Joanna Eberhart’s stellar media career as a cutting edge television producer of reality TV shows.

I shall pause briefly to re-explore the term “postfeminism” and to foreground the dominant meanings which will be attached to it throughout this essay. The term was first coined as far back as the 1980s<sup>4</sup> but since the 1990s its discursive connotations have been analysed

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<sup>3</sup> And this nostalgia is spreading backwards in time as the women in *Sex and the City 2* (2010) feature in cameo flashback as their younger 1980s selves; additionally Candace Bushnell published *The Carrie Diaries* in April 2010, a month before the film sequel’s premiere.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Bolotin, “Voices from the Postfeminist Generation”, *New York Times*, 17 October 1982.

critically by feminists; earlier, more positive accounts of the meanings of postfeminism have waned as more and more critics identify the seductions of the term as comforting us with the assurance that feminism's work is over. Postfeminism depends upon notions of feminism and feminist politics for its existence, but it often resorts to parody to diminish the historical importance of Second Wave feminism. It seems that postfeminist discourse is most successful when found in popular culture where it has become adept at absorbing criticisms and contradictions and at presenting itself as a way of communicating authentically about what is really important to today's woman; in this way a specifically female audience feels that it is the main addressee and in recent times this has extended to a growing mature audience with the money and time to consume films and buy boxed set DVDs of their favourite serial shows.<sup>5</sup> A postfeminist mode of address has become ubiquitous in popular forms which target women, and it is at its most successful and compelling in the portrayal of the problems confronting strong independent powerful women who have families and functional relationships; at one and the same time this discourse of postfeminism offers positive, reassuring messages to women while inscribing increasingly narrow definitions of femininity around body consciousness and age (see Gill 2007). As Sadie Wearing observes, "redefining age in these discourses seems to rely exclusively on the 'girling' of older women; attributing glamour to older bodies is linked to rejuvenating them" (2007: 294): in *The Stepford Wives* obviously age is frozen and reversed in the construction of the female robot; but the women in the other two films are "girled" in the sense that their absorption into heterosexual monogamy through marriage or cohabitation is always being forestalled by relationship problems: time and again they are returned to their long-time friends, even though their relationships are posited as the absolute goal.

Because of the ubiquity of the postfeminist message in cultural productions, tackling postfeminism from a critical perspective can be

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<sup>5</sup> In fact Ashley York argues that "Hollywood now treats women's blockbusters as franchises rather than the standalone products of chick flicks past" to the point that they are required to move beyond a gendered audience (York 2010: 16).

nothing short of disheartening and sometimes frankly boring, as it becomes difficult not to level what seem to be the same kind of “old” feminist criticisms at any number of cultural products, even when these same products are selling themselves as diverse, empowering and in tune with real women’s concerns and pleasures. The TV series of *Sex and the City* was one such programme that stood out for many amongst the homogeneous dross: its long running, open-ended format allowed the slow development of relationship, professional and financial problems which were fluid and ongoing, rather than fully resolved. On a seemingly more trivial note, its fetishisation of Carrie’s love of shoes became an aspirational fetish—now apparent in chick lit and other postfeminist narratives—associated with hedonistic pleasures, specifically pleasing oneself. In fact, as Ariel Levy observes, “a feathery pair of mules became the linchpin of a glamorous, romantic evening in Central Park. It was as though without the shoes, everything else – the moonlight, the trees, the man – would dissolve into the night, leaving nothing but the bleak mundanity of regular life in its place” (2006: 172). In light of the commercial success of chick fiction, TV and films there is a commitment to seem to address the needs of women as *individuals*, to interpellate them as consumers for whom purchasing and self-improvement is a pleasure. In such programmes the emphasis on luxury obscures, however, the genuine tedium of the bulk of “consuming” women do—buying groceries and household necessities—a task that has to be infinitely repeated.

Postfeminism can be boring and frustrating to analyse because its message requires little unpacking and lies prominently on the surface of these narratives. For many of us in the business of offering feminist critiques of popular culture in the twenty-first century, it can seem like we’re simply tilting at windmills. This article touches on those sensations of boredom and ennui which trouble a feminist cultural critic attempting to make sense of the postfeminist distractions of popular culture. Yet I will also try to inject some new interest into this study by identifying how postfeminism becomes more and more an empty signifier, not simply because it has become overburdened with meanings over the past two decades, but also and more significantly because the majority of the audience it addresses when ventriloquising a form of “old” feminism simply don’t recognise the feminist rhetoric that it is parasitic upon. Twenty years on young women have been brought up on and inured to

postfeminist rhetoric; it has supplanted feminism and provides a contemporary audience with a feminist memory, mediated, rendered palatable and just critical enough to key into an apolitical sense of social dissatisfaction with heterosexual and gendered role scripts.

*Sex and the City* in many ways is a touchstone at the heart of this discussion, because its global success as TV franchise makes it familiar to the widest range of consumers and critics. *The Stepford Wives* may be more familiar as a term which has migrated into common parlance to describe a surrendered wife; or as a memory of the 70s horror film—and of course the remake was released in the same year as the TV series *Desperate Housewives* first aired, itself a confusing “homage” and resistance to *The Stepford Wives* of the 1970s. *The Women* is by most people’s standards a failure; it neither channels the bitchy competitiveness and sassy humour of either the play or the George Cukor film version, nor does it do anything “feminist” with its all-women cast—all the more surprising since it is directed by Diane English, better known for her involvement with the acclaimed US TV series *Murphy Brown*, and it features actors such as Meg Ryan, Candice Bergen and Annette Benning, known for taking on strong female roles in the past. As “remakes” and refunctionings of various kinds these examples allow us to explore how postfeminism migrates across or disrupts texts which might have been read as “feminist” by many. This is true of Levin’s 1972 novel *The Stepford Wives* and Forbes’s 1975 film adaptation, both dystopic from the young wives Joanna and Bobbie’s point of view; Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* is a view of New York as the city of commitment-phobes where no successful career woman has a happy ending: women’s lives have changed dramatically in professional terms with no consequent attitudinal shift in the men they date. Clare Boothe’s play and Cukor’s film of *The Women* portrayed the world of women with no men present at all, dramatising the spaces of the domestic and of naked consumerism and self-improvement. Diane English’s remake continues this strategy (right until the end); again domestic and consumer spaces are populated entirely by rich women, but the film’s opening also suggests, improbably, that women have gained dominance in the public sphere in an opening shot of a street populated entirely by women

(represented by their feet).<sup>6</sup> While this film is the only one to begin in such a potentially utopian fashion, interestingly all these films sideline or exclude men, even when men's needs and the old-fashioned notion of the "male gaze" seems to be situated at their very heart, and this is a point to which I shall return later.

As I previously mentioned, the postfeminism utilised in these texts involves "the simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticisation of many of the central goals of second-wave feminism" (Stacey quoted in Dow 1996: 87). In order to achieve this effect postfeminism:

- Has an intertextual relationship to feminism
- Speaks "through" popular culture and is often nostalgic
- Is anchored in "lifestyle"—consumption and commodification
- Deploys the rhetoric of choice and self-fashioning
- Displays anxiety about ageing and physical decline, but also represents "real" age as always deferred by health and beauty regimes
- Pits pleasure against political engagement; postfeminist characters have clear views on gender, but use humour to deflect pain and seriousness

Feminism lurks on the periphery as a distant voice or nagging conscience in the background to women's lives as represented in these texts, whereas postfeminism is foregrounded in the way women ask themselves what seem to be "feminist" questions and as if by magic come up with the all-purpose postfeminist answer that they have a right to "choose", and proceed to make their life choices in alarmingly predictable ways untrammelled by gender politics and in ways that do not threaten to destabilise the status quo. The overall effect of this is that "feminist" sentiments are themselves cleansed and made over to offer complacent observations about largely well-off white women enjoying the fruits of advanced capitalism, finding the well-trodden path of heteropatriarchal romance and somehow making it their own. We see

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.dvdbeaver.com/film2/DVDReviews43/the%20women%20bluray/title.jpg>

this to some extent in Carrie's transformation to "bride" in the film of *Sex and the City*; she will marry at the end, but will eschew the *Vogue* style event seemingly heralded by her earlier modelling assignment,<sup>7</sup> in favour of a more modest affair, dressed in a vintage label-less suit at the public Registry Office.

The postfeminist "script" coming into its own since the late 1980s, might be framed as an infinitely adaptable text. Attached to "women's films" it excises diversity whilst celebrating difference, and the more it "speaks for" the professional woman, the more it erodes or erases the workplace, or at least once again problematises women's place within it. Postfeminism, as has already been hinted, speaks in the contradictions that demonstrate most articulately the tensions remaining between the public and the private in the lives of women. In its maturing second or third decade, postfeminism continues to ventriloquize feminism but the effect isn't to raise the consciousness of the audience as much as to gain their complicity in this "knowledge" which is raised as social critique but for which there is no solution.

One of the controversial areas of feminist debate has for example been that of the fashion and beauty industry and the politics of women's clothing in their impact in reinforcing the ideal-type feminine.<sup>8</sup> Here the perspectives offered by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) are pitched against the self-help pro-female capitalism of Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962) and later the pioneering style of *Cosmopolitan*. While Friedan dissected the soft-sell of magazine advertising and the drudgery of housework and observed the paradox that

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<sup>7</sup> Carrie accepts to model different designers' wedding dresses for a fashion spread in *Vogue*. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=059XfzfOq-s>

<sup>8</sup> One recent writer, Linda M. Scott, avers that what she sees as the anti-beauty stance of feminists is anti-difference and elitist. In her book historical contextualising challenges what she sees as the homogenising stance of modern feminism; but it might be argued that she herself is conflating the individual pleasures of self-adornment with the *industrial* context of contemporary fashion discourse, moreover arguing that the industry has long been female dominated and therefore cannot be seen to oppress women: this suggests a superficial acquaintance with theories of patriarchy perhaps. See *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism* (2005).

since professions became open to women, “‘career woman’ has become a dirty word” (1982: 60), Gurley’s book and her role as *Cosmo* editor posited a relationship between glamour and female career success. In *The Women* the glossy magazine editor Sylvie best represents the successful career woman who might be regarded as at the forefront of the new feminist vanguard. Talking about the fashion magazine industry she opines: “We tell women to feel good about themselves and then we print fifteen pieces on crazy diets. We run ads for wrinkle creams: the models are twenty years old! We’re driving women mad.” All anticipated responses have been effectively evacuated and we are left with the “display” of feminist “wisdoms” trotted out dutifully. We almost forget for a moment that Sylvie’s job as a style editor is to replicate women’s fashion desires every month; we’re drawn to her anxiety about finding a “new” trend or losing her job to a younger more savvy editor.

Similarly in the first *Sex and the City* film, the image of Miranda and Carrie in their witches’ hats<sup>9</sup> is compelling and gestures toward their palpable ageing since the TV series opened in 1998, and therefore their possible descent into “cronehood” and feminine invisibility. Miranda, shopping with Carrie for Halloween outfits observes, “the only two choices for women: witch and sexy kitten” to which Carrie responds, “you just said a mouthful there, sister!”<sup>10</sup> as if acknowledging decades of feminist research into the virgin/whore dichotomy in Western culture. Feminists can utilise these embedded “feminist” critiques in our analyses of these films, but let’s not be duped into thinking we have discovered layered or embedded meanings; these are very much on the surface of the film, flagged up only to be swept aside.

The “messages” offered in the three films are playfully complex in their potential contradictions, negotiating as they do the maze of signifiers of empowered women being utilised in popular forms. Even though, as mentioned earlier, the messages are not hard to interpret, the rhetoric of feminism is trotted out dutifully, as a lesson already learned.

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<sup>9</sup> In the scene, only Miranda is wearing a witch’s hat, but Carrie’s high fashion headpiece signifies either witchcraft or pilgrim fathers.

<sup>10</sup> This exchange between Miranda and Carrie (minus the witch’s hat which Miranda puts on later in the same scene) is actually included in the film trailer. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4jVEyGuTfY>

The films therefore negotiate two imagined territories: that of the liberal feminist commonsensical view (acceptance that women earn less than men, still take responsibility for domestic maintenance, are chief child carers, are more affected by ageing and contemporary body fascism than men, etc.) pitted against the “guilty pleasures” associated with postfeminism, where one is given “permission” to enjoy femininity and what are regarded as its trappings—encouraged to accept reluctantly that success is in direct opposition to emotional and domestic contentment. All postfeminist chick flicks deploy the trope of the powerful woman, yet focus on women’s issues and lives by a concern with female friendship, female sexuality and location of the drama in the spaces of consumption and leisure as well as (more occasionally) the workplace. Given the focus on serial singleness and fear of ageing, even the nourishing female friendships which so often feature cannot disguise the sense that these women’s lives begin to look rather bleaker and more culturally determined than the discourse of postfeminism would at first indicate.

Ultimately, Carrie’s marriage to Big in *Sex and the City* and the birth of a much-desired male child to Edith (Debra Messing) at the end of *The Women* is a forced “happy resolution” which actually disrupts the postfeminist rhythms of each text, by the presence of the returning male, who has been discursively almost redundant until this point. *The Women* offers us a tableau of the happy alternative family of three friends gathered round Edith and her new-born baby boy in the absence of the father<sup>11</sup> (recalling, intriguingly, the all-female family tableau in all three film adaptations of *Little Women*). The film stays true to Cukor’s version by leaving the penitent and returning husband offstage, but the male child acts as his proxy, a reminder that in postfeminist discourse male/female relationships are at its heart. In *Sex and the City*, however, Big, having eventually married Carrie privately, returns her to her three best friends waiting on the other side of the Registry Office door in a curious reversal of the marriage ceremony when the bride is “given away”. This tacit acknowledgement of the crucial practical and emotional support supplied by Carrie’s female friends further

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<sup>11</sup> See [http://www.agonyboothmedia.com/images/articles/The\\_Women\\_2008/The\\_Women\\_2008\\_016.jpg](http://www.agonyboothmedia.com/images/articles/The_Women_2008/The_Women_2008_016.jpg)

problematises the putative role of the partner in heterosexual relationships: after all, many of her most romantic moments have been shared with the other women rather than with Big.

The remade *Stepford Wives*, on the other hand, changes what was in the first film a literal performance of patriarchy to a symbolic and ironic one. The evil genius behind the robot wives is Claire Wellington and not her husband Mike, whom she has reconstructed as a robot after she learns of his affair and kills him. Claire's confessional testimony at the film's end is that of the career woman who latterly sees the error of her ways; and in effect a presumed retrosexist patriarchal plot is revealed to be a postfeminist one. The humour is placed here as a relief valve; ultimately there is nothing funny about women as domestic robots in a postfeminist world, and the original plot is taken to Byzantine contradictory extremes to deflect any trace of the original location in horror; but what remains is sometimes both disturbing and offensive. In a scene at the Men's Association the servile female, summoned by her husband's remote control, is quite literally transformed into a cash machine, which somehow tames the "money shot" of hardcore porn but recalls the doublespeak of some of its producers. The absurdity of the scene attempts to deflect offence, but it is hard not to recall the June 1978 cover of *Hustler* which displayed Larry Flynt's declaration on its front cover that "we will no longer hang women up like pieces of meat", positioned next to an image of a woman being passed through a meat grinder with only her legs remaining.

As Tasker and Negra remind us in their recent work: "Postfeminist culture works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalise aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of women as empowered consumer [...] postfeminism is white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self" (2007: 2). This doesn't mean that class and race don't make their appearance, but in empowering working-class women and women of colour key problems arise in these texts. Louise (Jennifer Hudson) in *Sex and the City* becomes Carrie's personal assistant after Big jilts her. As the purveyor of home spun wisdoms Louise's character works hard and represents small town cohesion, real romance, tempered by her shared enthusiasm with Carrie for handbags and shoes. As the potential fifth friend who might add diversity to the group, Louise nonetheless retains a racially determined

role, so visible in women's films of the 1940s, of the domestic helper.<sup>12</sup> Crystal, the mistress in *The Women* retains the traces of Cukor's version (where she is played by Joan Crawford) intact in that, having lost the battle for Stephen at the end, she returns to the perfume counter where she worked as the "spritzer girl", her bid to marry above her station having failed. In remaking female destiny for the twenty-first century, these films still reassert racial and class determinism.

Significantly, however, most of the impetus of postfeminism's attraction to the female spectator is that of "choice". In the will to individualise the women depicted in these films, more "truths" have to be told about female emotional responses and sexuality. For the editors of *Reading Sex and the City*, "women talking about sex, creating humour and sharing laughter are changing the script" (Akass and McCabe 2004: 13), but the scene in *Sex and the City* in which Samantha covers her naked body with sushi (which she has, implausibly, made herself) to surprise a lover who fails to arrive, is resonant of earlier romance films where the woman waits at the end of a telephone for the man who belatedly returns her calls. As Katha Pollitt notes however, "women have learned to describe everything they do, no matter how apparently conformist, submissive, self-destructive or humiliating, as a personal choice that cannot be criticized because personal choice is what feminism is all about" (2004: 13). In the case of *Sex and the City* the beautifully composed image of Samantha is disrupted as, bored, she gets up and the sushi splats to the floor to be eaten by her dog. Samantha does "change the script" in the sense that she leaves her long-term lover, Smith (this scene having taught her that monogamy has made her inauthentic in some way) and returns to promiscuous singledom; yet the emphasis on her age at the end of this film (and sent up to absurd proportions in the 2010 sequel) suggests the script interpellates her in ways that are never fully explored.

Epiphanies or makeovers are a central feature of chick flicks, and Samantha's return to her old self offers a certain audience satisfaction in that the four key women of *Sex and the City* perform different

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<sup>12</sup> For an interesting discussion of postfeminism and African American women see Kimberly Springer, "Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women" (2007: 249-276).

dimensions of postfeminist femininity, thereby suggesting its conflicting selves can never be resolved in the form of one woman. Certainly this multiplication of the feminine through the multi-voiced text is becoming a staple of chick lit. In *Sex and the City* Carrie Bradshaw is something of a choric figure; her inclinations are to be Charlotte, Miranda and Samantha simultaneously—to fuse the domestic feminine, the oxymoronic career woman, and the sexually self-defined woman—and the futility of this desire is continually exposed by her separation, her need to ask questions (via her column) which are never satisfactorily answered.

For her part, Joanna Eberhart in *The Stepford Wives* is recast from the aspiring part-time photographer of the original novel and film to the cold-blooded media professional whose reality TV shows play women off against men and where it is women who seek liberation through sexual determination. Having been shot at by an angry wronged husband, who alarmingly tells a female audience he is going to “kill all the women”,<sup>13</sup> Joanna is sacked and her mental decline and exhaustion anticipates the story of Claire Wellington in the finale of *Stepford Wives* who refashions her world when she discovers that her life as a successful professional woman has been a sham because her marriage falls apart in the most predictable of ways (she finds her husband in the arms of another woman). Her creation of an ideal husband is ironically (but not surprisingly in the logic of postfeminism) that of the perfect patriarch to whom she gladly seems to defer: the fact that Joanna “kills” him (she hits him and his head comes off revealing he is a robot) suggests that patriarchy is more easy to unseat from a postfeminist world view.

Self-fashioning also figures as another central postfeminist project in these film adaptations. In the remake of *The Women* Mary’s self definition is the key to her happiness and the resumption of her relationship with husband Stephen comes second to the establishing of her own fashion label and season collection. This offers an entirely different turn of events from that of Cukor’s film where Mary, realising her friends’ advice has caused her divorce and made her utterly

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<sup>13</sup> This phrase recalls real examples of femicide, such as the Montreal massacre on 6 December 1989.

miserable, chooses to fight to regain Stephen by using her “feminine” wiles against the working-class Crystal. In English’s remake, as a result of her husband’s affair with Crystal—and after her teenage daughter nearly goes off the rails—postfeminist Mary reconstructs herself through photos and magazine clippings, just as the jilted Carrie reviews her past (via her wardrobe and by means of a “fashion show” played out to her friends) and, briefly, professionalises her writerly identity through the employment of a personal assistant. The remake of *The Stepford Wives* retains the central drama of the forcible reconstruction of the personalities of the Stepford women through their bodies and household skills, but in having Joanna’s husband Walter as the rescuer who deactivates the software in their brains that altered their behaviour in the first place, men in postfeminist discourse are the rescuers of twenty-first century women, guiding them through the feminist and patriarchal minefields onto the path of liberal, moderate re-engagement with men.

As we explore the language of postfeminism in these examples it becomes clearer that there is little by way of coherent definition; the term represents the absorption and consequent dilution of feminism by the substitution of political statements of intent for images of women playfully submitting their feminine selves to scrutiny. That postfeminism still relies on its power to represent women as autonomous and successful by “forgetting feminism” or eliding it can be taken as read and takes us no further than the space already demarcated and theorised by cultural commentators. In order to move on from this position we must take our analysis of such cultural products one step further and ask what “feminism” it is that is being summoned and who can recognize it?

Intriguingly postfeminism in popular culture has prompted a style of cultural criticism which suggests an embracing of the surfaces of postfeminism alongside reinterrogations of feminism and a celebration of consumption: as Akass and MacCabe suggest, the critics in their collection of essays “trace a path through contemporary cultural and critical debates, through ideas about popular and TV culture, and through our own responses to and pleasures in the *Sex and the City* text” (2004: 7). Other feminist cultural critics find themselves negotiating a space between the fannish temptation to participate in postfeminist cultural events versus the wish to continue to offer feminist political resistances to dominant heteropatriarchal ideologies. For those who don’t suffer the boredom of the tiresome role of reinventing the same feminist critique of

numerous texts, there is the sense of being implicated and hailed by the pleasures of the text, just as Third Wave feminism claims to embrace heterogeneity, celebrating fashion, adornment and the consumption of mainstream popular culture, set against the development of a politicised and responsible self.

In adaptation of texts such as these feminism is always “othered”, which is not to say that some pure form of more desirable feminism inhabited the “original” texts in some unproblematic way (certainly not in the case of *The Women*), but that these postfeminist cultural productions are so adept at producing pleasures in the simultaneous recognition and erasure of feminism that they become arid and the opposite of their intention to be authentic—ersatz. The constant return to the theme that full empowerment and heterosexual romance are incompatible has meant that under mature postfeminism men increasingly are being put under erasure. In *Sex and the City* Big continues to inhabit the sidelines of the film (just as he did the TV series) because he is of minimal narrative interest except that he provokes the emotional crises which Carrie’s friends can nurture her through; and having finally married her he swiftly symbolically delivers her back to her female homosocial “home”.<sup>14</sup> Men in these films acquire a certain temporal stasis—Big is “himself”, never really able to grow up since their first meeting 10 years previously; in the film he learns to mimic the language of romance by copying the love letters of famous men;<sup>15</sup> Mike Wellington in *Stepford Wives* is arrested at the point of his infidelity and his retrosexist persona replays the nostalgia of the film’s credits which feature real advertisements of women demonstrating domestic kitchen products from the 1950s and 60s. Stephen in *The Women*, true to the previous versions, never makes his reappearance and remains in his visual absence the wayward virile husband. The women in all these films, heralding the darker undertow of postfeminist thinking are ageing and battling decline and deterioration—as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra observe, “female adulthood is defined as a state of chronic

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<sup>14</sup> As Gerhard notes, “This elective family structure is one that gay men and lesbians have relied on for generations – a self-selected family that willingly meets its members’ needs” (2005: 44).

<sup>15</sup> An invented book that was developed and published after the film’s release.

temporal crisis” (2007: 10). I have already mentioned how Samantha in *Sex and the City* represents the woman battling age by refusing to “be” her age, and in *The Women* Mary and Crystal represent ageing mother versus youthful sex siren (the “witch or sexy kitten” of Carrie and Miranda’s exchange, mentioned earlier). *Stepford Wives* interestingly reverses this trajectory by having the women caught in their prime; made over as sterile, sexier versions of themselves.

It is ironic but surely not coincidental that as men physically disappear from the postfeminist romance, the emergence of the “bromance” features their side of the story. With the postfeminist narrative’s focus on friendship and sharing of problems, the lack of male friendships in the chick flicks is addressed in films such as *I Love You, Man* (2009) suggesting a separate spheres logic which even heterosexuality can’t heal. The underlying message mature postfeminist popular cultural discourse powerfully sends is that the only answer to the problem of how to portray the contemporary heterosexual relationship is to decouple the couple and enact the relationship in homosocial spaces. However, as I’ve previously speculated in my work on chick lit, while men are more increasingly being put under erasure in classic women’s texts, these texts themselves remain colonised by a “male” logic of heteropatriarchy (2005: 211-12). It is as if postfeminism’s schizophrenic logic at once situates men at the heart of the “problem” in women’s lives, but cannot condemn them or represent them changing, for fear of offering an authentic (and therefore dangerous) feminist critique. So instead women constantly remake themselves anew, via the makeover trope, in opposition to the static image of the romance hero.

The postfeminist dynamic in popular culture has turned in on itself; its plots re-enact the rhetoric of choice, self-fashioning, perpetual youth and carefree humour once too often. The recently released second film of *Sex and the City* tries to carry a winning formula too far in an artificial plot twist which is necessary to evacuate the now married Big from the scene. Separatism, cast as the extreme and unattractive result of “strident” feminism, ironically taints these narratives of postfeminism; unable to politicise the relationship of women to men, they offer us, albeit temporarily, a dangerously liberating radical feminist solution—the promise of a world without men.

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