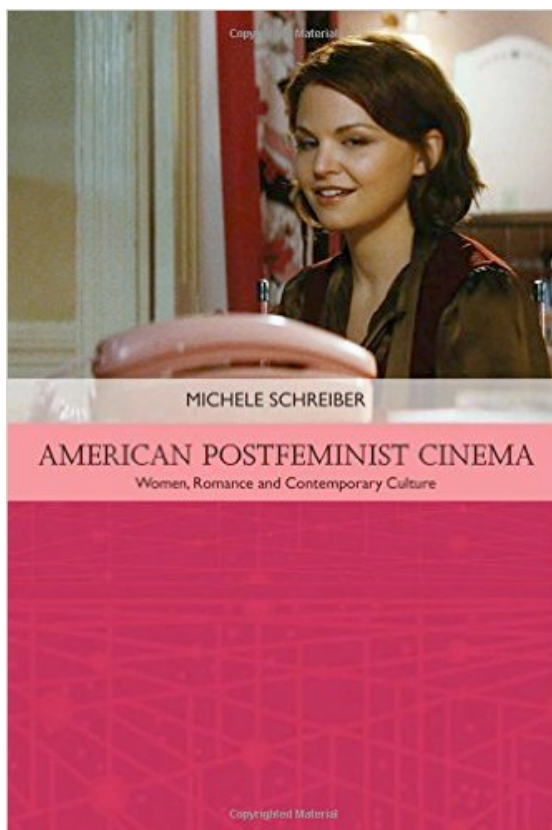


BOOK REVIEW

*American Postfeminist
Cinema: Women, Romance
and Contemporary Culture*
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***American Postfeminist Cinema: Women,
Romance and Contemporary Culture.***
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In *American Postfeminist Cinema: Women, Romance and Contemporary Culture*, film studies scholar Michele Schreiber provides a rich analysis of the relationship between heterosexual romance narratives and postfeminist culture. Over the course of five chapters, she interrogates how the cycle of postfeminist romance films made from 1980 to 2012 portrays and reflects “contemporary women’s anxieties (...) and anxieties about women” (Schreiber, 2014: 2).

According to cultural theorist Angela McRobbie, postfeminism is deployed as a substitute for feminism, which is perceived as having already passed. In her influential book, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, she argues that postfeminism “positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (McRobbie, 2009: 12). For McRobbie, the Bridget Jones character that first appeared in the UK *Independent* newspaper column, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, and in the eponymous book and films that followed, embodies postfeminist culture. Bridget Jones is unapologetically feminine, dreaming of romance, finding the right man, getting married and having children, and is not particularly career-driven. McRobbie notes that this and other postfeminist films celebrate “a kind of scatterbrain and endearing femininity,” as though it has been lost and needs to be retrieved. She continues, “postfeminism in this context seems to mean gently chiding the feminist past, while also retrieving and reinstating some palatable elements, in this case sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent” (McRobbie, 2009: 12). McRobbie observes that postfeminism can be understood as a “double entanglement”, for it “comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life (...) with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations” (McRobbie, 2009: 12).

In *American Postfeminist Cinema*, Schreiber draws from McRobbie’s notion of “double entanglement” to highlight that postfeminism “simultaneously looks backward and forward”, that is, it espouses both conservative and liberal values in relation to gender, sexuality family and romance (Schreiber, 2014: 20). Schreiber sets out to demonstrate that postfeminist romance films, while conventional, are open texts that invite different readings or interpretations, some of which can be progressive and others more conservative. Moreover, Schreiber cautions against dismissing romance films as anti-feminist for they do attempt to engage with many female-centered issues and offer

spectators a “variety of pleasures”, even if representations of women remain somewhat limited (Schreiber, 2014: 20).

The book is organized thematically to explore how romance has become entangled with postfeminism’s tensions, contradictions and anxieties about the changing role of women in society. Schreiber arranges her case studies into clusters of common cinematic binaries that reduce women’s lives into either/or options (the most significant being the choice between love and family or career) to highlight the similarities between seemingly disparate films and to “explore the potential of the both/and” (Schreiber, 2014: 20). For Schreiber, postfeminist films reveal not so much “an impasse”, as “a struggle and/or conversation” about women’s complex issues and concerns (Schreiber, 2014: 20).

In the introduction, Schreiber notes that the familiar narrative structure of romance films, which include the first meeting between the female protagonist and her soon-to-be love interest, the courtship, the consummation, the problem, the resolution and the (usually) happy ending, as well as aesthetic techniques (for example, what she calls the “mise-en-scène of luxury”) contribute to romance’s continued appeal. The first chapter provides a historical account of how the romance genre has evolved and been shaped by the political and cultural changes of the time. The three case studies presented here, *Kitty Foyle* (Sam Wood, 1940), *An Unmarried Woman* (Paul Mazursky, 1978) and *27 Dresses* (Anne Fletcher, 2008), underscore the changes and continuities of the genre. The second chapter examines the either/or binary common in films such as *You’ve Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1998) that pits the figure of the sentimental and fantasy-driven woman against a more pragmatic and rational male outlook. This chapter also looks at how this binary circulates across and is influenced by different media platforms such as Jane Austen novels, self-help books and Internet dating advertisements.

In the third chapter, Schreiber addresses how issues of temporality, history and women’s subjectivity become inextricably linked in romance texts. She focuses on postfeminist films that present some form of time travel to explore how this narrative “limits or expands” women’s (both characters and spectators) options (Schreiber, 2014: 85). For example, a film like *Kate and Leopold* (James Mangold, 2001) undermines women’s progress in the public sphere by idealizing the past as slower, less demanding and more romantic than the present, and having the titular character choosing to relinquish her successful career to travel back in time to 1876 to be with her one true love – a time in which women had no social standing (Schreiber, 2014: 88-89). Schreiber

also looks at what she calls “nostalgia narratives”, evident in the film *Sleepless in Seattle* (Nora Ephron, 1993), to discuss that inherent in postfeminist culture is “an impulse to reconcile the past, present, and future simultaneously” (Schreiber, 2014: 96). Nostalgia here, however, is not a desire for the actual historical past. Rather, Schreiber argues, the language of nostalgia allows both women characters and spectators “to fulfill their desire to ‘have it both ways’ – to long for the unapologetic traditionalism of romance of a prefeminist past while still remaining in a more progressive present – without any negative repercussions” (Schreiber, 2014: 96). Moreover, nostalgia provides a communal language that women can use to forge bonds with one another and to navigate the current socio-political landscape.

The fourth chapter discusses how the girl-woman character prevalent in the postfeminist cycle creates a false dichotomy between sexuality and romance. This character is usually a naïve, girly and cute woman who is oftentimes also a klutz in life and when it comes to men, that is, her behavior and traits are more akin to that of an adolescent. Schreiber points out that this type of representation seen in romantic comedies, such as *When Harry Met Sally* (Rob Reiner, 1989) and *13 Going on 30* (Gary Winick, 2004), serves “to placate cultural anxiety about sexually empowered adult women” and to undermine female agency and authority in the socio-political sphere (Schreiber, 2014: 115). Furthermore, the de-eroticization of women helps to warrant a movie the coveted PG-13 rating that appeals to a broad audience. On the other hand, the portrayal of women as active sexual beings tends to occur in R-rated dramatic films, which feature plots that “turn dark and murderous”, such as in *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987), *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and *Unfaithful* (Adrian Lyne, 2002) (Schreiber, 2013: 115). The message here seems to be that women who remain innocent and sexually unaware will be rewarded with a man and long-lasting happiness, but those who actively pursue their sexual desires will be punished. As McRobbie notes, the sexually active, single women in these R-rated dramatic films are depicted as a threat who “disrupt the moral economy of the new traditionalism” (i.e. the country-living nuclear family with a professional male breadwinner and a stay-at-home wife and mother) and become a cautionary tale for young women (McRobbie, 2009: 35-36). Schreiber, however, comments that the dichotomy between sexuality and romance is breaking down in more recent media texts, such as in movies like *No Strings Attached* (Ivan Reitman, 2011) and *Friends with Benefits* (Will Gluck, 2011), and the television shows *Girls* (Lena Dunham, 2012-) and *The New Girl* (Elizabeth Meriwether, 2011-),

which attempt to depict complex, intelligent and self-aware adult female characters. The show *Girls*, for example, has been adept at portraying sexuality and sex in a raw and explicit manner, still a rare feat in television (Schreiber, 2014: 136).

The final chapter focuses on the works of two of the most prominent female directors in Hollywood, Nancy Meyers and Nicole Holofcener, to examine how the conventions of big-budget and independent filmmaking shape representations of heterosexual romance, female independence and family life (Schreiber, 2014: 141). Schreiber observes that Meyers, who works within a large production budget and is responsible for such mainstream success as *What Women Want* (Nancy Meyers, 2000), creates in her films a *mise-en-scène* of luxury (expensive set designs and glamorous costumes) that packages an upper-class lifestyle and romance into one desirable commodity (Schreiber, 2014: 146). Through consumerism, the professionally successful female protagonists in her films are not only able to exercise their autonomy and choice but to find love, the only thing missing in their already fulfilling bourgeois lives. On the contrast, Holofcener works with modest budgets and her films tend to have a realist tone for they avoid opulent aesthetics and happy endings. For example, a film like *Friends with Money* (Nicole Holofcener, 2006) narrates the mundane life of a group of female friends who do not always make the right choices nor do they get what they want, which can make for an uncomfortable viewing experience because of how it destabilizes the conventions of the romance genre (Schreiber, 2014: 161).

Schreiber explains early in her book that the exclusion of queer romance films from her study is not to endorse the industry's limited representations, but rather to highlight its "resistance to dealing with anxiety-provoking deviations from heterosexual gender norms" and to think in which ways these norms can be challenged in the future (Schreiber, 2014: 5). However, what is not addressed here is the fact that all of these postfeminist romance films and TV shows feature an almost exclusively white cast – an issue raised by McRobbie who argues that "dominant feminine whiteness becomes an invisible means of rolling back on anti-racism" (McRobbie, 2009: 41). What are the implications for the current political terrain of perpetuating the notion that "white is right" (white is beautiful, white is wealth, white is power)? What to make of the fact that the category of "woman" continues to be envisioned in postfeminist films and books, such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (Sandberg, 2013), as white and middle-upper class? In a recent interview with *The New York Times*, philosopher Nancy Fraser (Gutting and Fraser, 2015) argued that this "leaning in" movement that invites educated middle-class

women to break the glass ceiling and climb the corporate ladder can only work by “leaning on others – by offloading their own care work and housework onto low-waged, precarious workers, typically racialized and/or immigrant women. So this is not, and cannot be, feminism for all!” Schreiber acknowledges this toward the end of her book, and in parenthesis, when she notes that racialized laborers “aid and support the main characters’ lifestyle choices” (Schreiber, 2014: 165). But the subject of race should not be left on the margins; rather, we need to engage with it precisely because it is a difficult and at times uncomfortable conversation to have. While postfeminist romance films have made some progress in the representation of female sexuality, there is a lot of work to be done for the inclusion and fair representation of working-class, queer and nonwhite people onscreen.

American Postfeminist Cinema is an accessible book that can appeal to a non-academic audience as much as to film and media students. Schreiber writes with passion and in a clear manner, which makes for an enjoyable reading experience. What is missing here, however, is an account of how to go about challenging such an entrenched culture that sells the illusion of progress and choice while locking women into either/or positions and while politics continues to undo feminism (see for example the recent cutbacks on Planned Parenthood and restrictive abortion bills in the United States).

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