

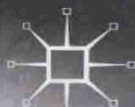


# **WOMEN ON SCREEN**

**FEMINISM AND  
FEMININITY IN  
VISUAL CULTURE**

**EDITED BY**

**MELANIE WATERS**



# Women on Screen

## Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture

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Melanie Waters



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# Introduction

## Screening Women and Women on Screen

*Melanie Waters*

*Women on Screen* provides a new critical overview of the representation of women and girls in contemporary television and cinema. In doing so, it builds on recent analyses of the relationship between feminism, femininity, and popular culture by Imelda Whelehan, Joanne Hollows, Diane Negra, Yvonne Tasker, and Angela McRobbie in order to shed light on the particular issues that swirl around on-screen portrayals of embodied female identity. Intervening in established and emerging debates about postfeminism, the 15 chapters in this book investigate the roles accorded to feminism and femininity in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century depictions of women's lives and ask why certain configurations of femininity – especially configurations of femininity that second wave feminism would seem to have rendered redundant or inappropriate – are not only persistent but also valorized within popular forms of visual culture.

Central to the examination of women on screen in this book is an analysis of the concept of screening itself: to be on screen, after all, is to have been subjected, already, to processes of screening. While the term “screening” typically denotes the practical processes of showing and viewing – the means by which the visual texts referenced in this collection are presented to, and consumed by, the public – it likewise refers to the systems of selection that inform the production and reception of these texts. In the first place, the chapters here are interested in the “screening” systems that lie behind the representation of women in any cultural text. In other words, they aim to focalize the decision-making strategies by which certain constellations of femininity are deemed appropriate (or otherwise) at particular historical moments, while also exploring how such judgements might be informed by feminist anxieties and/or anxieties about feminism. Secondly, they are

committed to an analysis of how portrayals of women in female-centred texts are “screened” within the space of feminist critical scholarship: What kinds of visual texts are screened within (and screened out of) this kind of scholarship? How are the attributes of women on screen identified, isolated, and delineated by feminist critics? What kind of value is apportioned to these various attributes, and why? In essence, then, “screening” simultaneously accounts for the showing and viewing of visual texts, as well as the processes by which particular images of women and girls are created or concealed, promoted or suppressed, then vetted and examined.

As I have already suggested, the precise ways in which women are screened in film and on television are illuminated by – and might also illuminate – ongoing debates about the relationship between feminism and femininity. As Charlotte Brunsdon notes in a 2005 article, it has become something of a commonplace within feminist discourses to characterize this relationship as “complex” and “contradictory” (113). While the contributors featured here acknowledge that such terms remain apposite to critical considerations of women on screen, the collection as a whole strives to avoid the critical impasse at which the use of such terms can leave us – an impasse where, it seems, any and every representation of female experience is understood as “vexed” or “ambivalent”, and where feminism itself is regarded as an objective political standard against which popular constructions of femininity are measured and, invariably, denigrated or dismissed. *Women on Screen* seeks to move beyond this impasse by recognizing that the relationship between feminism and femininity – just like the relationship between any diverse ideological groupings – is always and already complicated, not least as a result of the various meanings which are ascribed to these respective terms. The chapters that follow, then, understand complexity and ambivalence as hallmarks of contemporary female-centred texts, but do so as a starting point for thinking about their wider implications. Rather than falling into the trap of using a “politically correct feminist identity” to render “other feminine identities... ‘invalid’” (Brunsdon, 1991, 379), we wish to highlight how such critical manoeuvres have come to operate within existing scholarship and draw attention to the ways in which they can both limit and redefine the terms of feminist debates about visual culture. At the same time, *Women on Screen* aims to recuperate to the realm of feminist scholarship those areas of women’s representation that such strategies tend to “screen out”. We are, then, looking to uncover new layers of complexity within contemporary cultural texts, rather than implying that their complexity resides

solely in their negotiation of the relationship between feminism and femininity.

## Postfeminism

At the heart of this collection lies a deep and necessary engagement with postfeminism and the various critical controversies by which it is orbited. Since the term began to acquire cultural currency in the early 1980s, feminist theorists have argued spiritedly over its meaning and usefulness, while trying to delineate its potential implications for critical and historical accounts of feminism.<sup>1</sup> For a number of thinkers in the 1980s and early 1990s, the concept of postfeminism invited interpretation alongside the media's increasingly antagonistic treatment of, or backlash against, the feminist agenda. As Brenda Polan contended in *The Guardian* in 1988, the endeavour of postfeminism to render itself nominally distinct from "older" incarnations of feminism – through its "post" prefix – indicates that it is not merely symptomatic of the backlash, it "is the backlash" (qtd. in Faludi 15; emphasis added). This proposal is significant in that it not only foregrounds the status of second wave feminism and postfeminism as discrete and monolithic movements (with postfeminism auguring a clear and deliberate break with the goals and politics of the second wave), but also indicates that postfeminism is a historically locatable reaction to the former – an idea which, as we shall see, is carried through into critical approaches to postfeminist cultural texts.

The "anti-feminist backlash" to which Polan refers is, of course, the subject of Susan Faludi's 1991 bestseller *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*. Elaborating on Polan's logic, Faludi argues that the term "post-feminism" is part of a re-branding strategy, one of the means by which the media in the 1980s endeavoured to signpost the "past-ness" of feminism, using it to conjure up a "new story" for a "younger generation who supposedly reviled the women's movement" (14). Although she identifies postfeminism as a 1980s phenomenon, however, Faludi uses the term flexibly to denote other historical eruptions of anti-feminist sentiment, and traces the initial emergence of postfeminism back to the American media's treatment of feminist organizations in the 1920s. As Faludi's varied usage implies, the prefixation or "posting" of feminism is open to wide and wild interpretation, depending on one's understanding of "post" – namely, whether "post" is viewed as designating a rejection of, continuity with, or ambivalence towards the feminism(s) by which it is predated.<sup>2</sup>

As Imelda Whelehan observes, the “post” prefix implies the functional inadequacy of “feminism” as a term; though this, she makes clear, does not guarantee the distinctiveness of feminism and postfeminism:

“New” and “post” are prefixes added to the term “feminism” when the writer or speaker wants to make it clear that they have a certain antagonism to the term, because of the connotations it generates, or because feminism by itself is seen to be inadequate to their own definition.... [A]ll imply that the word feminism is not enough to embrace their own political programmes or personal agendas, and that it has been manipulated to certain ends from which they want to exclude themselves. But as with most additions of prefixes, the central concept remains the same, so that “new” and “post” imply cosmetic changes rather than radical rethinking. Feminism is portrayed as a territory over which various women have to fight to gain their ground; it has become so unwieldy as a term that it threatens to implode under the weight of its own contradictions. (77–78)

These semantic ambiguities are alluded to more explicitly by Diane Negra in *What a Girl Wants* (2008). Situating postfeminism firmly within the cultural landscape of the 1990s and early 2000s, Negra shows how it operates as a “widely-applied and highly contradictory term [which] performs as if it is commonsensical and presents itself as pleasingly moderated in contrast to a ‘shrill’ feminism” that it regards as “rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist” (2). Although postfeminism is routinely associated with the negative characterizations of feminism that Negra here describes, the frequent signposting of its seemingly “contradictory” applications implies its status as a more complex and elastic phenomenon. In this vein, Genz, one of the contributors to this book, has remarked on the extraordinary number of terms – including “Girl Power”, “popular feminism”, and “do-me feminism” – that have been used in conjunction and/or interchangeably with postfeminism in recent years. For Genz, this polysemy not only liberates postfeminism from any fixed or singular definition but also speaks to its cultural currency, establishing its existence “as a conceptual entity in its own right”. According to Genz, then, postfeminism need not be a “negation [or] sabotage” of feminism; rather, the “post” prefix may instead designate “reliance and continuity” or even “a contradictory dependence on and independence from the term that follows it” (18–19).

Perhaps the most salient, and least controversial, feature of postfeminism is its inextricability from popular, and particularly visual, culture. From Naomi Wolf's investigation into how mainstream images of female beauty shape women's social experiences in *The Beauty Myth* (1991) to the analyses of the impact of "raunch culture" on the behaviour and aspirations of young women in Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2006) and Natasha Walter's *Living Dolls* (2010), the discourses of postfeminism are, increasingly, only intelligible within the context of the contemporary visual iconography by which we, as global citizens, are perpetually bombarded.

If the term "visual culture" can encompass everything from fine art, photography, and architecture to film, television, advertising, and digital media, its particular value lies in its gesturing towards the interpenetration of different visual forms and codes as a hallmark of postmodern culture, as well as in its recognition of the growing predominance of visual media over verbal/textual forms of communication within the mediasphere. These factors are especially significant in a collection of this kind, which focuses predominantly (though not exclusively) on film and television produced in the United States and the United Kingdom since 1990. Such contemporary texts, after all, are always and already marked by the issues of cross-mediation to which the term "visual culture" pertains. In using it, then, I hope to speak directly to the particularities of the current cultural moment, while at the same time telegraphing the persistence of links between feminist discourse and issues of female visibility – links which are writ large in everything from Laura Mulvey's seminal psychoanalytical account of women-on-screen in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) and Susie Orbach's delineation of the overweight female body in *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978), to Carol Dyhouse's recent work on fashion and femininity in *Glamour: Women, History, Feminism* (2010).

## Feminism and popular culture

As Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley have observed, feminism is difficult to conceptualize outside of the popular: "apart from women actively involved in the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, most people's initial knowledge and understanding of feminism has been formed within the popular and through representation" (2). Even so, like other political campaigns of the time, the second wave was – and is – regularly "conceived of as a social movement that was 'outside' of, and

frequently oppositional to, the dominant culture" (4). In other words, it is assumed to take place in a hypothetical "real" space that lies, possibly, beyond the sensationalizing tentacles of the mainstream media. Still, even the women who were "actively involved" in the second wave were eminently preoccupied with the issue of women's representation in the media. As is clearly evidenced in some of feminism's key texts, such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), the second wave's social agenda was guided precisely by anxieties about representation, relating particularly to the circulation of "unrealistic" and "misleading" images of women in popular magazines, advertising, literature, television, and film.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of *The Second Sex*, for example, De Beauvoir traces gender inequality through a discussion of the roles occupied by women within the popular imaginary, from the witches, wicked stepmothers, and damsels-in-distress of common folklore to the modern-day Cinderellas of Hollywood cinema (in the films of Orson Welles and Edmund Goulding), and the complicated, conflicted women who populate the novels of D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. Friedan, with a background in journalism, was likewise concerned with the prescriptive models of domesticated womanhood that were offered up in post-war culture, exploring the conservative gender politics of the articles and short fiction that constituted the stock-in-trade of popular women's magazines like *Ladies Home Journal*, *McCalls*, and *Good Housekeeping* during the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> A few years later, in 1970, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* drew attention to the misogynistic dimensions of fiction by Henry Miller and Norman Mailer,<sup>5</sup> while Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) dissected the persistence of various feminine stereotypes across a widening spectrum of popular media.

The second wave thus maintained an interest in investigating the ways in which "real" or authentic womanhood has been distorted or elided within popular culture, while also viewing its agenda, in part, as a means of correcting these perceived representational injustices. For this reason, it is necessary for contemporary scholars to acknowledge and interrogate the tendencies within some existing scholarship to imply the existence of feminism(s) beyond the realm of representation. After all, as Hollows and Moseley suggest, such criticism "assumes that feminism, or the feminist, can tell us about popular culture, but does not examine what popular culture can tell us about feminism" (1). Given the inextricability of feminism and popular culture, any unilateral reading of the kind that Hollows and Moseley describe is destined to be partial and misleading. Part of the aim of this collection, then, is

to foreground the extent to which feminism, femininity, and popular forms of visual culture constitute a dynamic and influential nexus of activity. In this spirit, it seeks to focalize the potential limitations of conceptual frameworks that rely exclusively on straightforward distinctions between different “species” of feminism. Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munford have already highlighted the potential restrictions imposed by the use of the wave paradigm, which tends to construct a monolithic account of each “wave” of feminist activity and in doing so “lends power to backlash politics and rhetoric” (177). As we will see, the backlash logic that Gillis and Munford identify with the wave paradigm is inscribed in many of the texts with which *Women on Screen* is concerned. In line with Gillis and Munford, the chapters here query the anchoring of particular conceptual models in presumptions about feminist conflict and inter-generational disagreements, while also acknowledging the ways in which such models continue to inform creative and critical configurations of contemporary female identities.

## The chapters

The chapters here are divided into four discrete but interlocking parts: “Generations”; “Sex and Sexuality”; “Makeovers”; and “Violence”. These parts reflect some of the key concerns by which popular representations of feminism and femininity are striated, but they also offer a framework for conceptualizing the dominant preoccupations of feminist media criticism at the start of the twenty-first century. While drawn together by a shared awareness of the extent to which postfeminist texts and contexts have been shaped by a particular issue – be it generational conflict, female sexuality, embodied identity, or gendered violence – the chapters in each part are marked by their sustained engagement with broader questions of power and visibility. Such questions are, after all, critical to considerations of the “postfeminist canon” and, more specifically, to the interrogation of postfeminism’s exclusionary tendencies – most conspicuously apparent in its “limited race and class vision” (Tasker and Negra 14–15) – with which *Women on Screen* is necessarily concerned.

The first part of this book, “Generations”, explores the ways in which generational models of feminism have informed fictional and critical approaches to feminine identities in popular culture. Each author acknowledges the role that such paradigms have played in shaping scholarly analyses of feminism and/or femininity, while endeavouring to show how they might also undermine or reduce the complexity of



these representations. Glitre and Cobb, for example, show how chick flicks dramatize feminist debates about independence and empowerment through the representation of women's personal and/or familial relationships. Focusing on the comedies of writer and director Nancy Meyers, Glitre argues that the evolution of these debates can be (re)viewed through reference to changing approaches to the figure of the working woman. From Goldie Hawn's society-girl-turned-soldier in *Private Benjamin* (1980) to Helen Hunt's high-flying advertising executive in *What Women Want* (2000), Glitre shows how Meyers' chick flicks register shifting attitudes to women in the workplace, while interrogating the persistence of the heterosexual romance motif in the wake of such shifts. In particular, she queries the use of the romantic resolution as a means of resolving the raft of dilemmas that the working woman presents.

The working woman is equally central to Cobb's investigation of the twenty-first-century chick flick. Demonstrating how feminist inter-generational conflict is often figured through the portrayal of antagonistic relationships between older and younger women, Cobb contends that chick flicks like *Monster-in-Law* (2005) and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) routinely use the mature career woman as a visual shorthand for feminism that is selfish, anti-familial, outmoded, and generally ineffective in the context of contemporary Western societies. With close reference to their individual star personae, Cobb shows how the casting of baby-boomer female actors – like Jane Fonda and Meryl Streep – opposite their younger counterparts – namely Jennifer Lopez and Anne Hathaway – is used as a means of signalling the final, triumphant displacement of second wave feminism's "old", selfish careerism by "new" family-oriented models of postfeminist identity.

If the chick flick speculatively proposes a different, and emotionally fulfilled, future for the postfeminist woman, then this is, perhaps, challenged within certain types of quality American television. Redeploying the term "New Woman" to refer to female professionals in film and television at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, White discusses the politics of empowerment through close reference to the representation of working woman in *Alias* (2001–06). Accounting for the vexed positioning of women within the context of the New Economy, White analyses Jennifer Garner's portrayal of Sydney Bristow – the "empowered" New Woman spy – through the lens of the show's approach to the ageing female professional. In this way, White shows how the sinister machinations and betrayals of the older women in *Alias* are used to symbolize a potential – if undesirable – future for the New Woman professional, thus highlighting the persistence of