

Post-feminism at an impasse? The woman author heroine in postrecessionary American film

Marie-Alix Thouaille

To cite this article: Marie-Alix Thouaille (2018): Post-feminism at an impasse? The woman author heroine in postrecessionary American film, *Feminist Media Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2018.1546203](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1546203)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1546203>



© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 12 Dec 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 312



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Post-feminism at an impasse? The woman author heroine in postrecessionary American film

Marie-Alix Thouaille

Department of Film, Television and Media, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

ABSTRACT

In this article, I sketch some of the ways in which postrecessionary films such as *Young Adult* problematise post-feminism as a “genre of living.” In deploying heroines who orient themselves toward the post-feminist good life by taking up the desirable subjectivity of “woman author” and yet find themselves unable to reap the promises of post-feminism, these texts exemplify what Lauren Berlant terms “cruel optimism.” Through its analysis of *Young Adult*, this article advocates for the need to integrate affect theory concepts and methodologies in the study of post-feminist media culture. Affect theory, and in particular the framework of cruel optimism, I contend, has the potential to open up new avenues of enquiry within the study of post-feminism, a critical genre that has arguably arrived at an impasse.


ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 January 2017
Revised 31 October 2018
Accepted 6 November 2018

KEYWORDS

Post-feminism; post-postfeminism; cruel optimism; affect theory; *Young Adult*

In recent American “indie” films such as *Young Adult* (2011) and *Girl Most Likely* (2012), the figure of the woman author as an aspirational post-feminist heroine finds itself under considerable strain. *Young Adult*’s woman author heroine, novelist Mavis Gary (Charlize Theron), notably stands in sharp contrast to the protagonists of *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), *Never Been Kissed* (1999), *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003), *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), and *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2009). As the film opens, Mavis sits at her desk working on her latest manuscript. Unlike Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), Josie Gellar (Drew Barrymore), Bridget Jones (Renée Zellweger), Andie Anderson (Kate Hudson), Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway) and Rebecca Bloomwood (Isla Fisher), for whom writing appears to be effortless, for Mavis, writing is decidedly laborious. Having typed 34 words in a Word document entitled “pieceofshit.doc,” Mavis’ happy facial expression morphs into a grimace and she opens her email inbox to procrastinate. Whereas in earlier chick flicks, female authorship signifies as a form of agentic, desirable womanhood,¹ in a text like *Girl Most Likely*, the woman author appears to have misplaced her optimism by buying into precisely these post-feminist aspirations. In an early scene, a dream sequence offers access to protagonist Imogene’s (Kristen Wiig) good life fantasy. First, her long-term boyfriend proposes marriage with a large diamond solitaire. Next, they luncheon at the Hamptons, their family now complete as a woman of colour cares for their newborn baby. Finally, Cynthia Nixon (of *Sex and the City* fame) hands Imogene a Tony Award for “Best Play.”

CONTACT Marie-Alix Thouaille  m.thouaille@uea.ac.uk

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

With its glossy articulation of personal and professional fulfilment, and extra-diegetic gesture to *Sex and the City*, this dream sequence crystallises a number of key post-feminist concerns. Imogene's idealised way of life is characterised by the privileges of the educated, white, middle classes—post-feminism's "default" subjectivity (Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra 2007, 2)—and by the aspiration to "have it all." The gendered struggle for heterosexual women to balance their personal life with work, and the potential to "downshift" one's career in order to "reprioritise family" indeed looms large in post-feminist screen texts of the early 2000s (Diane Negra 2009, 18). But Imogene's fantasy soon collapses. While she thanks her husband for enabling her professional success, she starts to vomit. As the real Imogene has her stomach pumped following a suicide attempt, the post-feminist dream is forcibly, messily expelled. Taken together, these two vignettes exemplify a shift in tone emerging in recent, realist, "indie," female-centred screen texts such as *Girls* (2012–2017), *In a World* (2013), *Obvious Child* (2014), *Adult World* (2014), *The Girl in the Book* (2015), *Ricki and the Flash* (2015), and *One More Time* (2015). These texts, I argue, are characterised by a sense of crisis emanating from a perceived breach of the social contract. Despite orienting themselves toward post-feminist ways of living through taking up the subjectivity of "woman author," these heroines are unable to reap the promises of post-feminism. What's more, the very pursuit of post-feminist aspirations is portrayed as destructive and toxic. This article therefore asks: what is at stake in a film like *Young Adult*? What do we, as scholars of post-feminist media culture, make of the beginnings of an industry cycle, which—without being overtly, or even straightforwardly, feminist—brings to the fore the ambiguities and contradictions of investing in post-feminist ways of living?

Post-feminism: a critical genre at an impasse?

Despite having become "one of the most important [...] terms in the lexicon of feminist cultural analysis" (Rosalind Gill 2007, 148), the term "post-feminism" has a complicated and hotly contested history. Since the 1980s, the term has been variously theorised as "an historical shift within," a "backlash against," an "epistemological shift in" feminism (148). This article's understanding of post-feminism is particularly indebted to the work of Angela McRobbie (2004, 2009) and Rosalind Gill (2007, 2008, 2016, 2017), who emphasise post-feminism as an object of cultural analysis, and situate themselves as critical analysts of post-feminism. Gill importantly theorises post-feminism as a "distinctive sensibility made up of a number of interrelated themes" (2007, 147) including:

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 the makeover paradigm; a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference, a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (2007, 147)

In its broadest sense, then, post-feminism can be defined as a "a set of ideologies, strategies, and practices that marshal liberal feminist discourses such as freedom, choice, and independence, and incorporate them into a wide array of media, merchandising, and consumer participation" (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018, 153). Critics emphasise the importance

of “choice” to post-feminist discourses: “the notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to post-feminist discourses which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities” (Gill 2007, 153). This “grammar of individualism” finally “turns the idea of the personal-as-political on its head,” meaning experiences of discrimination are “framed in exclusively personal ways” (Gill 2007, 153). This emphasis on individualistic choosing emphasises “woman as empowered consumer” (Tasker and Negra 2007, 2), and ultimately turns the female self into “a project to be evaluated, advised, disciplined and improved” (Gill 2007, 156). Noting the synergy between neoliberal and post-feminist discourses, Gill observes that the “autonomous, calculating self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism” (2007, 164).

The term “post-feminism” has recently once again come under scrutiny, with certain critics arguing that it “may be ‘redundant’ or ‘falling short’ for understanding this putatively ‘new’ moment” (Gill 2016, 620). This dissatisfaction is felt in Charlotte Brunsdon’s description of the term as “broad and baggy,” and in her suggestion of the possibility that “its moment/utility is now waning” (2013, 378). Suzanne Leonard, meanwhile, observes that “what was once a winking or knowing post-feminist posture—evident particularly in romantic comedies, chick lit, and female-centred television drama—has hardened in recent years into a more brittle and even cynical vision” and that “twenty-first century female media is decidedly less misty-eyed in its estimation of the behaviors and postures that women must adopt” (2018, 19). The global economic downturn of 2008 has arguably been central to this critical soul-searching. Charting the gendered effects of the economic crisis, Negra and Tasker contend that post-feminism “has not disappeared but reads differently now that the economic bubble has burst” (2014, 6–7). For example, post-feminism’s eliding of economic concerns in “setting aside the fact that the majority of women approach paid labor as a necessity rather than a ‘choice’” no longer feels tenable in a recessionary context (Tasker and Negra 2007, 2). Along similar lines, Stéphanie Genz argues that

the larger cultural climate and ethos of neoliberal postfeminism needs to be recalibrated and reassessed in the aftermath of the boom-and-bust economic model. Certainly, if late twentieth and early twenty-first-century postfeminism was marked by optimism, entitlement and the opportunity of prosperity, such articulations have become more doubtful and less celebratory in a post-2008 recessionary environment where the neoliberal mantra of choice and self-determination is still present but becomes inflected with the experiences of precarity, risk, and the insistence on self-responsibilisation. (2017, 18)

In addition, the renewed visibility of feminism in popular culture and the associated speculation regarding the potential emergence of a “fourth wave” (Kira Cochrane 2013; Nicola Rivers 2017; Prudence Chamberlain 2017), have given critics pause. As the title of the recent collection *Emergent Feminisms: Complicating a Postfeminist Media Culture* (Jessalynn Keller and Maureen E. Ryan 2018) suggests, such “feminist emergence” complicates the post-feminist media landscape. As Gill asks, “What place does the notion of postfeminism have at a moment in which feminism has seemingly become hip? Is postfeminism irrelevant in these new times? Are we now *post-postfeminism*?” (2016, 611, emphasis original).

These crucial questions have especially coalesced around the HBO series *Girls*. Just as *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002), *Sex and the City*, and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) proved crucial to the critical articulation of post-feminism in the late 1990s and early 2000s,² so *Girls* has been a prism through which to apprehend ostensible shifts within post-feminist media culture, and, in turn, the continued relevance of the term in the 2010s. Sean Fuller and Catherine Driscoll thus argue that “if the discourse of postfeminism has always engaged with the impact of feminism on public and private life, popular culture today also records decades of postfeminist discourse and the television identified with it” (2015, 255). As a result, while critics “have retrospectively discussed popular television of the 1980s and early 1990s as ‘postfeminist,’” *Girls*, on the other hand, “belongs to a very different moment in the histories of both postfeminism and television” (Fuller and Driscoll 2015, 255). In much the same way, Meredith Nash and Ruby Grant argue that “*Girls* allows for a re-articulation and re-mobilisation of post-feminism for a millennial generation” (2015, 2). Nash and Grant thus contend that *Girls* “embodies a distinctive post-feminist sensibility” (2015, 12). Recognising the “continued relevance of post-feminism” as a concept, Nash and Grant propose the term “post-feminism” to describe “a revised post-feminist sensibility for a millennial generation” (2015, 12–13).

Notwithstanding these insightful interventions, this article argues for the continued relevance of the term “post-feminism” in cultural analysis. As Tisha Dejmanee notes, “Declaring a theoretical fatigue with postfeminism does not erase its dominant presence in popular culture, and indeed a generation or more of women have now grown up not knowing anything but postfeminism” (2016, 131). Arguing that post-feminism has undergone a “turn to interiority,” Dejmanee suggests that such a turn “does not so much dismantle postfeminism as exemplify its resilience, adaptability and generativity within a variety of different social conditions and across a range of different media platforms” (2016, 131). Demonstrating precisely this “resilience, adaptability and generativity,” Banet-Weiser unpacks the key synergies between contemporary “popular feminism” and post-feminism:

While postfeminism and popular feminism are oppositional on the surface, they are actually mutually sustaining and focus on white, middle-class Western women. The feminist visions that come into dominant view in the current moment are shaped by the same affective politics that shape postfeminism: entrepreneurial spirit, resilience, gumption. And, these discourses of post- and pop-feminist empowerment are intimately connected to cultural economies, where to be “empowered” is to be a better economic subject, not necessarily a better feminist subject. (2018, 154–155)

Gill furthermore shows how “a postfeminist sensibility informs even those media productions that ostensibly celebrate the new feminism” (2016, 610). Not only have we not moved “beyond” post-feminism, Gill argues, but it is now “virtually hegemonic”:

Like neoliberalism, it seems to me that postfeminism has tightened its hold in contemporary culture and has made itself virtually hegemonic. It is harder today to see postfeminism’s ‘edges’ or borders. Compared with a decade ago, it is much more difficult to recognize as a novel and distinctive sensibility; it has become the new normal, a taken-for-granted common sense that operates as a kind of gendered neoliberalism—and it is all the more troubling for this. (2017, 609)

Like Gill, I maintain that post-feminism as a category of cultural analysis “still has much to offer feminist cultural critics” (2016, 610). In particular, she sees the term as central to understanding the inconsistencies and contradictions of “one of the most bewildering [moments] in the history of sexual politics”; a moment in which “for every uplifting account of feminist activism, there is another of misogyny” (2016, 613). In such a moment, Gill argues, it is “crucial that we *think together* the rise of popular feminism in tandem with rapidly intensifying misogyny” (2017, 611, emphasis original). This robust refutation of “post-postfeminism” feels especially pertinent in the aftermath of the November 2016 US presidential elections in which Hillary Clinton (a symbol of the “rise of popular feminism”) lost to Donald Trump (a signifier of that “rapidly intensifying misogyny”). In its ability to make sense of such contradictory social forces, post-feminism as a critical term continues to enable precisely the kind of “thinking together” we urgently need. This article is moreover sympathetic to Gill’s claim that “It is also crucial that we develop notions of postfeminism that can theorize both *continuity and change*, and that do not understand transformation in terms of simple displacement—as if the coming to prominence of one set of ideas automatically displaces another” (2017, 611). Rather than claiming a “displacement” of post-feminist ideas, I am interested in tracking subtle shifts *within* post-feminism.

The turn to affect

Recognising that post-feminism “operates on and through emotions,” this article takes on board Gill’s call for scholarship to “engage not only with its cultural forms but also with the affective and psychic life of postfeminism” (2017, 620). Gill’s conceptualisation of postfeminism as a “distinctive sensibility” (2007, 147) indeed hints at the ways in which it circulates through, and is produced by, emotions and affects. Just as post-feminism was “first apprehended as a hunch, an intuition, a sense that something was changing” (2013, 388), the recent critical questioning of the term has likewise sprung from a “sense” that something has changed. See, for example, Catherine McDermott’s claim that “There is a pervasive sense in *Girls* that something unintelligible has gone terribly wrong” (2017, 56). Building on Tasker and Negra, who suggest that post-feminism “has not disappeared but reads differently now that the economic bubble has burst” (2014, 6–7), this article posits that post-feminism feels different in the wake of the 2008 global economic downturn. For example, post-feminism’s eliding of economic concerns in “setting aside the fact that the majority of women approach paid labor as a necessity rather than a ‘choice’” (Tasker and Negra 2007, 2), no longer feels tenable in the context of austerity. As indicated above, this article is not interested in problematising “post-feminism” as a critical term; rather, I am sensitive to the ways in which recent texts “feel” different and the need to attend to those feelings. To make sense of such feelings and intuitions, this article draws on affect theory concepts, in particular the work of Lauren Berlant (2011), as well as earlier concepts which have been instrumental to recent developments in the field, such as Raymond Williams’ “structures of feeling” (1977) as well as Arlie Russell Hochschild’s “feeling rules” (2003).

Apprehending post-feminism as a “structure of feeling” crucially illuminates how the post-feminist sensibility manifests as a “particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense

of a generation or a period" (Williams 1977, 131). I also find Hochschild's concept of "feeling rules," or norms of emotions that are shared amongst social groups, for example feeling "gay at parties, sad at funerals, happy at weddings" (1979, 552) particularly useful here. As Negra (2009) shows, post-feminism relies on "a set of 'feeling rules' around gender" (12). Negra then goes on to argue that post-feminism's gendered feeling rules amount to a kind of "affective tyranny" (2009, 140). "Conceptualising postfeminism as a form of affective tyranny," Negra suggests, "helps to explain why a figure like domestic doyenne Martha Stewart is regarded so negatively by many" (2009, 140). Although Stewart is "utterly postfeminist in the ways that she models hyperdomesticity," she is nonetheless "'off script' in affective terms. That is to say that the star's grim, controlling persona and icy demeanor make her cooking and crafts skills appear more as a display of virtuosity than a demonstration of labor in the service of others" (2009, 140). Berlant's work crucially illuminates how texts like *Bridget Jones's Diary* or *Sex and the City* have codified a number of affective expectations relating to the realisation of the post-feminist good life—so much so that they have come to function as an interpretative rubric through the post-feminist female subject is invited to make sense of her life. Catherine McDermott shares this view, arguing that "it is through genre, that complex affective structures like postfeminism offer subjects ways of living in which they are invited to invest their subjectivity" (2017, 50). With this in mind, it becomes clear that the "something unintelligible" which has gone "terribly wrong" (2017, 56) in a text like *Girls* is precisely the disparity between the glamorous lifestyle promised by the likes of *Sex and the City* and the lived experience of characters like Hannah Horvath (Lena Dunham) whose life is characterised by the precarity of postrecessionary culture.³ Despite her costly college education and reserves of white, middle-class privilege, *Girls'* Hannah finds herself unable to realise the post-feminist good life which she feels entitled to: professional success, class mobility, romantic love, fulfilment—she cannot even afford to pay rent. While Hannah's potential "homelessness" is considerably cushioned by class privilege, its hovering threat nonetheless marks a breach of the social contract.⁴ Having hitherto promised the middle-classes immunity from the experience of precarity, such moments puncture the post-feminist subject's "anticipation of the good life" (2017, 47). The show's title, *Girls*, likewise hints at a breach of the social contract: the heroine's failure to grow up into a mature "woman."⁵

Berlant's "cruel optimism" furthermore sheds light on the ambiguities of postrecessionary American screen texts. As Berlant explains, a "relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire functions as an obstacle to your flourishing," for example by actively "imped[ing] the aim that brought you to it initially" (2011, 1). Where cruel optimism operates, an "enabling" object, project or attachment is also "disabling," so that the "vitalising or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place" (Berlant 2011, 25). Central to the phenomenon of cruel optimism is the huge difficulty and loss entailed in attempting to detach from what is cruel. "It is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working" (Berlant 2011, 263) because it calls into question both the fantasy and the individual attached to it. McDermott astutely notes that "Falling for a false promise is not only inconvenient, it is embarrassing," in turn, "to acknowledge that we have misplaced our optimism feels less like genre's failure to live up to and fulfil our expectations than our

own failure to reap the rewards promised by genre” (2017, 55). McDermott then goes on to argue that to lose “hold of the fantasy that fulfilment resides in postfeminist genres has the capacity to devastate the sense of self-continuity that is derived from our attachment to genre” (2017, 55). The fear of having embarrassingly misplaced one’s optimism and the potential loss of an object which enables subjects to “add up to something” (Berlant 2011, 2) elucidates why individuals persevere for so long in attachments that are “already not working.” Cruel optimism importantly yields what Berlant terms the “impasse,” defined as “a space of time lived without a narrative genre” (2011, 199). In the impasse subjects are simultaneously “overwhelmed, forced to change, but also stuck” (Berlant 2011, 21), yielding “dithering, tottering, bargaining, testing” (Berlant 2011, 28). Despite the huge loss which it entails, the impasse is characterised by moments of “bargaining”: it is “a space in which we learn to adjust to the loss of a fantasy” (McDermott 2017, 53). To adjust or adapt to the impasse thus “involves a gesture, or undramatic action that points to and revises an unresolved situation” (Berlant 2011, 199).

In the remainder of this article, I sketch some of the ways in which the heroine of *Young Adult*, Mavis, is simultaneously “overwhelmed, forced to change, but also stuck” (Berlant 2011, 21). I demonstrate how, finding herself at an impasse, she both relies on, and yet “bargains” with post-feminist genres of living. Through this analysis, I make the case that affect theory concepts, and, in particular the work of Berlant, have much to offer students of post-feminism. As feminist media scholars, we indeed find ourselves in our own scenario of cruel optimism: both frustrated with the limits of post-feminism as a critical framework, and yet passionately invested in it as a tool enabling us to make sense of the world. To be clear, I have no wish to suggest that the term post-feminism is no longer useful or productive; rather, I contend that affect theory has the potential to unlock new avenues of enquiry within the study of post-feminism, a critical genre arguably at an impasse.

Cruel optimism and post-feminist authoriality in *Young Adult*

As Pamela Thoma remarks, the female protagonist as “striving professional writer of some description is actually ubiquitous in postfeminist culture” (125). The trope, Thoma notes,

is particularly well established in chick lit, which features heroines employed in media outlets such as women’s magazines, newspapers, TV stations, or bookstores. Writerly occupations with commercial potential are nearly as common in chick flicks, not only adaptations of chick lit [...] but also such films as *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days*, *The Ugly Truth* (2009), and *The Proposal* (2009). Finally, television is definitely in on the act with NBC’s Liz Lemon in *30 Rock* (2006–13) and HBO’s series *Girls* (2012–2017). (2014, 125)

Thoma is particularly sensitive to the ways in which authorship is understood as an appropriately gendered form of labour for the post-feminist woman subject. Emphasising the gendering of authoriality, Thoma distinguishes between “the aestheticised, literary forms associated with the masculinised figure of the writer as artist” and the “devotionalised commercial forms of writing that are sanctioned for women” (2014, 125). Crucially, while the male writer is “ensconced in literary culture” and thus

“understood to operate outside of, and be unconcerned with, commercial culture, or positioned as someone who suffers nobly for the rewards of participating in high culture,” the woman author “participates willingly in an expanding global media industry effectively modelling an abiding interest in the production and consumption of the texts in which her work appears” (2014, 125). In fact, Thoma shows how female authorship “is presented as an appropriate and potentially lucrative alternative to the all-consuming professions that will leave women emotionally disconnected from others” (2014, 128). Thoma furthermore detects a linkage of women’s writing with forms and modes of agency favoured by neoliberalism:

Writing is represented as an appropriate form of entrepreneurial labor because it simultaneously monitors, reflects on, and expresses the heroines’ unambiguous and authentic femininity. As a recurrent trope of female endeavour, writing facilitates the overt display of self-work via the extensive use of a first-person mode. Moreover, the expressive occupations of these protagonists provide a pretext for both autobiographical statements and a broadly confessional mode. Such a mode tends to operate via a set of formulas: the shaming of the flawed female subject, coupled with surveillance by audiences; her subsequent commitment to a makeover (with aid provided by wise friends or lifestyle experts); and the presentation of a significantly changed heroine. (2014, 126)

Like Thoma, I see the woman author as a staple of post-feminist media culture. Indeed, as a form of labour which is creative, immaterial, feminised, relational, but also entrepreneurial, writing is recurrently figured as an appropriate vehicle for the enacting of neoliberal—yet feminist-inflected—agency. As I have argued elsewhere, in screen texts of the late 1990s, the woman author often signifies as post-feminist; while she is often portrayed as unruly, her agency is curtailed in important ways, and in the end, texts in which she features prioritise those forms of agency which leave patriarchal authority undisturbed (Marie-Alix Thouaille 2017).

In contrast to earlier screen texts then, *Young Adult* suggests that Mavis’ attachment to post-feminist fantasies of authorship belie misplaced optimism. Her passionate investment in post-feminist genres (both in the fiction she authors and in the life she leads) is depicted as toxic and cruel. In an early scene, she stumbles out of a bar to explain to former high school classmate Matt Freehauf (Patton Oswalt) the “real” reason behind her return to their hometown of Mercury, Minnesota. “Alright, here’s the deal,” she slurs, “Buddy Slade and I are meant to be together, and I’m here to get him back.” Unfazed by the fact that Buddy (Patrick Wilson), has a newborn baby, and is by all accounts happily married, Mavis exclaims: “Don’t you get it Matt? Love conquers all. Have you not seen *The Graduate*? Or, like, I don’t know, anything?” Contrasting with the naïve assertion that “love conquers all,” the setting, a dingy parking lot behind a bar, as well as Theron’s performance of drunkenness, create of sense of tonal dissonance. Mavis’ reference to *The Graduate* (1967) moreover feels strained given the film’s ambiguous ending as Elaine (Katharine Ross) and Ben (Dustin Hoffman) sit on the bus looking increasingly uneasy about their actions. As this vignette indicates, the desire to fulfil romantic platitudes that “love conquers all” is what animates Mavis, but this longing for romance turns out to be damaging to herself and to others, suggesting she has fallen prey to cruel optimism.

The film’s title, *Young Adult*, further problematises her connection to the generic scripts of post-feminist fiction and its obsession with the girl subject. One on level, the title refers to Mavis’ authorship as a ghost-writer of the young adult series *Waverley Prep*.

Like *Sweet Valley High*, a series of 181 teen novels attributed to Francine Pascal (but authored by an army of ghost-writers), in *Young Adult*, *Waverley Prep* is a long-running series of highly formulaic genre fiction books. In some ways, this genre is characterised by a kind of stasis: the heroines of *Sweet Valley High*, Jessica and Elizabeth Wakefield, were aged 16 for 20 years. Likewise, never having outgrown her teenage self who was the most popular girl in school, Mavis enjoys a disordered relationship to time. On another level, then, the title figures Mavis' attachment to post-feminist tropes (which she repeatedly enacts through her authorship of young adult fiction) as a symptom of her failure to grow up into a mature adult. That Mavis' novel is depicted as a childish form of wish-fulfilment connects her authorship of young adult fiction with her immaturity. In the following extract from Mavis' *roman-à-clef* conveyed through voiceover, perfect protagonist Kendal Strickland explicitly stands in for Mavis, love interest Ryan Ashby for Buddy, and the "dumpy new girl" for Buddy's wife, providing insight into Mavis' own skewed worldview:

Kendal Strickland never felt threatened. If anything, she felt a deep sense of pity for this rebound girl. Not in a competitive way, she wasn't the type to show off. That said, she couldn't help her own popularity. It wasn't her fault that one year she was voted homecoming queen... of a neighbouring high school. Yes, Kendal Strickland was attractive; that was obvious. Other girls were so insecure, stressing about their faces and their figures. Not Kendal. Hers was a gracious, effortless beauty that glowed from within. However, being that beautiful could also be intimidating. [...] How could Kendal make sure her own perfection wouldn't scare away Ryan, the love of her life?

As the voiceover celebrates Kendal's "gracious, effortless beauty," the film cuts from a scene with Mavis at her desk to Mavis laboriously using straighteners to curl her hair and wig, and secure the wig into place. The spillage of voiceover from the scene of authorship to the scene of beautification consolidates the identification the viewer is encouraged to make between Kendal and Mavis, whilst suggesting that Mavis' investment in beautification is an attempt to reverse the process of ageing and to recapture her lost youth. That there is nothing effortless about Mavis, creates a sense of dissonance between the voiceover and image depicted on screen, diffusing the fantasy of "effortless beauty" that post-feminist fictions peddle. This sequence highlights the cruelty of Mavis' attachment to post-feminism as a genre of living whereby Mavis must continually misread her own actions and motivations, misrecognising jealousy as pity, and labour as effortlessness.

In contrast to the glamour of *Sex and the City*, Mavis' authorship is explicitly depicted as laborious, dull, and lacking in spontaneity. The fact that she is commissioned, and chased by her editor, to write her novel for example highlights the practice of writing as commercial transaction. What's more, the "Series Bible" formally dictates the terms of the writing itself, codifying the authorised storylines and characterisation. As such, Mavis' authorship directly conflicts with romantic views of self-actualising, spontaneous, autobiographical writing. Mavis troubles the "childbirth metaphor [that] has yoked artistic creativity and human procreativity for centuries" (Susan Stanford Friedman 1987, 49). As a ghost-writer, and someone who has suffered a miscarriage, Mavis's authorship cannot be straightforwardly read as "procreating." Although she works from home like Carrie Bradshaw, Mavis' desk is a professionalised, rather than domestic space: it is furnished with the accoutrements of mundane office work: notebooks,

volumes of paperwork, a large file entitled “Waverley Prep Series Bible,” and a printer. Her use of the draft title “pieceofshit.doc” indicates her contempt for the waning *Waverley Prep* series, for her own complicity as a writer reproducing romance as an aspirational genre of living, and for her own writing more broadly.

In addition, Mavis’ legibility as a creative professional is precarious within the industry, as the following exchange with a sales associate (Brian McElhaney) in a bookshop suggests:

- BOOK ASSOCIATE: Are you writing in there?
 MAVIS: I’m the author. I’m signing it.
 BOOK ASSOCIATE: You’re Jane MacMurray?
 MAVIS: No. Jane MacMurray just created the series. I wrote the book. I’m Mavis Gary-Crane. See?
 BOOK ASSOCIATE: Do you know Jane MacMurray?

Although she “wrote the book,” Mavis is not intelligible as the originator of the *Waverley Prep* series. Her name is relegated to the inside book cover, underneath that of the public-facing “author” and literary celebrity Jane MacMurray. To add insult to injury, her signature actually devalues the books as objects: “when merchandise is signed, we can’t send it back to the publisher.” With the series no longer successful, Mavis’ work is now increasingly worthless. Given the neoliberal blurring of the boundary between work and self, the message is that Mavis’ economic utility as well as her social value are waning. Not only has her Young Adult book series been put out of business by the success of new teen fiction trends such as *Twilight* but Mavis herself has been displaced by an embodied version of the franchise: Buddy’s wife, Beth, is played by Elizabeth Reaser, who starred in the *Twilight* films between 2008 and 2012. Mavis has also been replaced by Beth musically (her band covers “The Concept,” a song which Mavis sees as the soundtrack to her and Buddy’s relationship), and maternally (by giving birth to Buddy’s baby where Mavis had a miscarriage). With Mavis outdone by Beth it is no wonder she feels “finished.”

At the end of the film, however, Mavis attempts to revise precisely the generic scripts which both her life and writing rely on. Having recognised her attachment to romance as cruelly impeding upon her wellbeing, Mavis finally rejects it by symbolically throwing Buddy’s green hoodie into the bin. This rejection is then also enacted through her authorship. As she packs up her belongings and prepares to leave town, we hear the following voiceover indicating progress in her final *Waverley Prep* novel:

Graduation turned out to be a bittersweet ceremony for Kendal. While honoured to be the valedictorian of her class, there was an unmistakable air of sadness over the sudden death of Ryan Ashby. Who could have imagined when Ryan and his girlfriend set sail that day that it would be the last time anyone ever saw them. Poor Ryan, lost at sea.

Given the novel is a thinly disguised fantasy of her own life, by killing off Ryan and his girlfriend in her novel, Mavis erases Buddy from her own life. Buddy/Ryan’s “death” is therapeutic and productive for Mavis, who, for the first time in the film, shows genuine affection to her pet dog Dolce.

This is not to say that Mavis' newfound warmth marks a change of personality—far from it. In the film's closing scene, Mavis sits in a diner on the way back to Minneapolis, finishing her novel:

Kendal felt the weight of her high school years lifting off of her as she emptied out her locker. Sure, she'd think about Waverley from time to time; cheer squad, the debate team, sneaking into the woods for a drink after class. But her best years were still ahead of her. Kendal Strickland was ready for the world. It was time to look to the future: a new chapter. As she boarded the train to Cambridge, she took one last look at her small town and blew it a kiss, thinking, "life, here I come."

During this final voiceover, the film cuts from a shot of Mavis' wrecked Mini Cooper, to a medium shot of Mavis looking dishevelled and depressed, and, crucially, wearing the same outfit she wore at the start of the film. The contrast between the upbeat narration and the drab aesthetics, aural message of growth and the visual suggestion of, at best stagnation, and, at worst, destruction, create a sense of ambiguity and ambivalence. In this way, *Young Adult* reveals that Mavis' desire to live/read her life through the generic codes of her teen novels has turned out to be "cruel." Such an investment in post-feminist genres of living here requires a misrecognition of labour as effortlessness and stagnation as progress. Revealing the inherently contradictory character of cruel attachments, *Young Adult* demonstrates that as much as Mavis' devotion to post-feminist ways of living threatens her wellbeing, they paradoxically also enable her to "add up to something." In her hometown she is for example fêted as a success. "You're the only person in Mercury who could write a book, or wear a dress like that. Everyone here is fat and dumb [...] Everyone wishes they could be like you" concludes a former classmate in whose eyes, Mavis' authorship signifies her specialness. In this way, Mavis illustrates how "whatever the content of the attachment, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living and to look forward to being in the world" (Berlant 2011, 24).

Conclusion

It would be a great disservice to romcoms and chick flicks of the late 1990s and early 2000s to smooth over the ambiguities and ideological contradictions which underlie them. Like many of their contemporaries, texts such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, or *Confessions of a Shopaholic* feature an early undercurrent of uneasiness or discomfort with post-feminist ways of living. Bridget's cry of pain when waxing, or her rehearsing of appropriate conversation topics ("isn't it terrible about Chechnya?" she repeats while Hoovering her flat in a vest and knickers) during her own pre-date montage hint at her failure to successfully inhabit the post-feminist "poise" she so desperately craves. Meanwhile, in *Shopaholic*, the joy of shopping is seriously undercut by Rebecca's mounting debt. Similarly, Andy discovers that the path to being a journalist is less than glamorous in *The Devil Wears Prada*. In recent texts such as *Young Adult*, I argue, this underlying discomfort has intensified, curdling into cruel optimism, so that post-feminism now appears to be simultaneously essential to, and impeding upon, the thriving of the heroine. *Young Adult* reveals both the incredibly high cost of going along with post-feminist genres of living, as well as the impossibility of detaching from it when so much

labour has already been performed in the service of realising this version of the good life. And yet, in drawing attention to the impasse in which characters like Mavis find themselves, postrecessionary texts offer a glimmer of hope. It is precisely because of their attrition of fantasy that scenarios of cruel optimism can bring into question “archaic expectations about having and building a life” (Berlant 2011, 6). In forcing individuals to “suspend ordinary notions of repair and flourishing,” the impasse asks “whether the survival scenarios we attached to those affects weren’t the problem in the first place” (Berlant 2011, 49). Mavis’ symbolic writing off of Buddy, even her wrecked Mini—these are small, but significant, gestures of bargaining pointing to “and revis[ing] an unresolved situation.” (Berlant 2011, 199). In different ways, and to varying extents, the postrecessionary woman author heroines of *Girls*, *In a World*, *Obvious Child*, *Adult World*, *The Girl in the Book*, *Ricki and the Flash*, and *One More Time* similarly offer small revisions to post-feminist genres of living. *Girl Most Likely*, for example, ends with a re-envisioning of Imogene’s good life fantasy: her new play *Exo-Life* is an off-Broadway success, and she celebrates opening night in a Hummer limo with her family. With these revisions (off-Broadway vs. Broadway, hummer limo vs. Hampton chic) the film suggests a brighter future is now in store for Imogene. These texts therefore problematise and revise toxic post-feminist clichés and give voice to a growing disenchantment with lives lived under the punishing imperatives of post-feminism. While it may not be possible to detach from post-feminism as an increasingly cruel genre of living just now, *Young Adult* and its revisionist contemporaries point to the political value of “bargaining.”

Notes

1. For analyses of the woman author as post-feminist heroine, see Pamela Thoma (2014) and Marie-Alix Thouaille (2017).
2. I’m thinking here of LS. Kim (2001), Bonnie J. Dow (2002), Rachel Dubrofsky (2002), Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read (2002), Laurie Ouellette (2002), Jane Arthurs (2003), Angela McRobbie (2004), Stéphanie Genz (2010).
3. Admittedly, the recession is not solely responsible for these conditions of heightened precarity. In an article published in (2008), Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt connect the growth of the precariat to “the growth and development of the World Wide Web and the huge expansion of the cultural industries and cultural production; both areas which are characterised by the degree to which they presume precarious labour” (16). While I have opted to use the adjective “postrecessionary” to describe the current historical moment, it is not my intention to obscure the interconnectedness of precarity and the digital in relation to immaterial or cultural labour such as authorship. Rather, I have chosen the term to emphasise the ways in which the 2008 recession marks a crucial turning point in postfeminist fictions: for example, post 2008, authorship as a profession is no longer imagined to be capable of satisfyingly sustaining the woman author’s desired lifestyle.
4. The threat of homelessness, is ever-present in postrecessionary screen texts, and with it, the possible loss of the generative potential of a room of one’s own. *Girl Most Likely* and *One More Time* both see their female protagonists evicted from their New York City apartments, and the heroines of *Adult World* and *In A World...* are kicked out of the parental home. An important caveat to these films’ depiction of precarity is that these heroines are educated, white, and middle class and thus in positions of relative privilege. In *Girl Most Likely* and *One More Time*, both protagonists are able to move in with a parent after being evicted, while *In a World...*’s Carol (Lake Bell) temporarily stays with her sister; in *Adult World*, Amy (Emma Roberts) is able to secure a house-share.

5. This sense of arrested development and perpetual girlhood is likewise echoed in titles such as *Young Adult*, *Girl Most Likely*, and *Adult World*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [AH/L50 3861/1].

Notes on contributor

Marie-Alix Thouaille recently completed her CHASE-funded doctoral researcher at the University of East Anglia (UEA). Her doctoral research studied the figure of the single woman author in contemporary British and American film. Her research is concerned with questions of gender and labour under post-feminism and neoliberalism. E-mail: m.thouaille@uea.ac.uk

References

- Adult World*. 2014. Film. Directed by Scott Coffey. USA: Anonymous Content.
- Arthurs, Jane. 2003. "Sex and the City and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama." *Feminist Media Studies* 3 (1): 83–98. doi:[10.1080/1468077032000080149](https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077032000080149).
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. 2018. "Postfeminism and Popular Feminism." *Feminist Media Histories* 4 (2): 152–156. doi:[10.1525/fmh.2018.4.2.152](https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2018.4.2.152).
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bridget Jones's Diary*. 2001. Film. Directed by Sharon Maguire. UK and USA: Working Title.
- Brunsdon, Charlotte. 2013. "Television Crime Series, Women Police, and Fuddy-Duddy Feminism." *Feminist Media Studies* 13 (3): 375–394. doi:[10.1080/14680777.2011.652143](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2011.652143).
- Busch, Elizabeth Kaufer. 2009. "Ally McBeal to Desperate Housewives: A Brief History of the Postfeminist Heroine." *Perspectives on Political Science* 38 (2): 87–98. doi:[10.3200/PPSC.38.2.87-98](https://doi.org/10.3200/PPSC.38.2.87-98).
- Chamberlain, Prudence. 2017. *The Feminist Fourth Wave: Affective Temporality*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cochrane, Kira. 2013. *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave of Feminism*. London: Guardian.
- Confessions of Shopaholic*. 2009. Film. Directed by P.J. Hogan. USA: Touchstone Pictures.
- Dejmanee, Tisha. 2016. "Consumption in the City: The Turn to Interiority in Contemporary Postfeminist Television." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 19 (2): 119–133. doi:[10.1177/1367549415585555](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415585555).
- Dow, Bonnie J. 2002. "Ally McBeal, Lifestyle Feminism, and the Politics of Personal Happiness." *Communication Review* 5 (4): 259–264. doi:[10.1080/10714420214688](https://doi.org/10.1080/10714420214688).
- Dubrofsky, Rachel. 2002. "Ally McBeal as Postfeminist Icon: The Aestheticizing and Fetishizing of the Independent Working Woman." *The Communication Review* 5 (4): 264–284. doi:[10.1080/10714420214690](https://doi.org/10.1080/10714420214690).
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. 1987. "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse." *Feminist Studies* 13 (1): 49–82. doi:[10.2307/3177835](https://doi.org/10.2307/3177835).
- Fuller, Sean, and Catherine Driscoll. 2015. "HBO's *Girls*: Gender, Generation, and Quality Television." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29 (2): 253–262. doi:[10.1080/10304312.2015.1022941](https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2015.1022941).

- Genz, Stéphanie. 2010. "Singled Out: Postfeminism's "New Woman" and the Dilemma of Having It All". *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43 (1): 97–119.
- Genz, Stéphanie. 2017. "'I Have Work... I Am Busy... Trying to Become Who I Am': Neoliberal Girls and Recessionary Postfeminism." In *Reading Lena Dunham's Girls*, edited by Meredith Nash and Imelda Whelehan, 17–30. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2007. "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10 (2): 147–166. doi:10.1177/1367549407075898.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2008. "Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times." *Subjectivity: International Journal of Critical Psychology* 25: 432–445. doi:10.1057/sub.2008.28.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2016. "Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times." *Feminist Media Studies* 16 (4): 610–630. doi:10.1080/14680777.2016.1193293.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2017. "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20 (6): 606–626. doi:10.1177/1367549417733003.
- Gill, Rosalind, and Andy Pratt. 2008. "In the Social Factory?: Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work." *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25 (7–8): 1–30. doi:10.1177/0263276408097794.
- Girl Most Likely*. 2012. Film. Directed by Robert Pulcini and Shari Springer Berman. USA: Anonymous Content.
- Girls*. 2012–2017. Television Series. Seasons 1–6. USA: HBO.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1979. "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure." *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (3): 551–575.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2003. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Original edition, 1983.
- How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*. 2003. Film. Directed by Donald Petrie. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- In a World*. 2013. Film. Directed by Lake Bell. USA: 3311 Productions.
- Keller, Jessalynn, and Maureen E. Ryan. 2018. *Emergent Feminisms: Complicating a Postfeminist Media Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Kim, LS. 2001. "'Sex and the Single Girl' in Postfeminism." *Television & New Media* 2 (4): 319–334. doi:10.1177/152747640100200403.
- Leonard, Suzanne. 2018. *Wife, Inc.: The Business of Marriage in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: New York University Press.
- McDermott, Catherine. 2017. "Genres of Impasse: Postfeminism as a Relation of Cruel Optimism in *Girls*." In *Reading Lena Dunham's Girls*, edited by Meredith Nash and Imelda Whelehan, 45–60. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2004. "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture." *Feminist Media Studies* 4 (3): 255–264. doi:10.1080/1468077042000309937.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: SAGE.
- Moseley, Rachel, and Jacinda Read. 2002. "'Having It Ally': Popular Television (Post-)Feminism." *Feminist Media Studies* 2 (2): 231–249. doi:10.1080/14680770220150881.
- Nash, Meredith, and Ruby Grant. 2015. "Twenty-Something *Girls* V. Thirty-Something *Sex and the City Women*." *Feminist Media Studies* 15 (6): 976–991. doi:10.1080/14680777.2015.1050596.
- Negra, Diane. 2009. *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Negra, Diane, and Yvonne Tasker, eds. 2014. *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Never Been Kissed*. 1999. Film. Directed by Raja Gosnell. USA: Fox 2000.
- Obvious Child*. 2014. Directed by Gillian Robespierre. USA: Sundial Pictures.
- One More Time*. 2015. Directed by Robert Edwards. USA: Starz Digital Media.
- Ouelette, Laurie. 2002. "Victims No More: Postfeminism, Television, and Ally McBeal." *The Communication Review* 5 (4): 315–335.
- Ricki and the Flash*. 2015. Directed by Jonathan Demme. USA: TriStar Pictures.
- Rivers, Nicola. 2017. *Postfeminism(S) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave. Turning Tides*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Sex and the City*. 1998–2004. Television Series. Seasons 1–6. USA: HBO.
- Tasker, Yvonne, and Diane Negra, eds. 2007. *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- The Devil Wears Prada*. 2006. Film. Directed by David Frankel. USA: Fox 2000 Pictures.
- The Girl in the Book*. 2015. Directed by Marya Cohn. USA: Variet.
- The Graduate*. 1967. Directed by Mike Nichols. USA: Embassy Pictures Corporation.
- Thoma, Pamela. 2014. "What Julia Knew: Domestic Labor in the Recession-Era Chick Flick." In *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*, edited by Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, 107–135. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Thouaille, Marie-Alix. 2017. "Postfeminist Authorial Corpography: Winona Ryder and the 1990s Woman Author Cycle." *Interférences littéraires/Littéraire interferences* 21: 89–104.
- Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Young Adult*. 2011. Film. Directed by Jason Reitman. USA: Right of Way Films.