Feminisms on Film:
Feminist Histories in Postfeminist Historical Women’s Films

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Abstract

This thesis undertakes a critical investigation of the relationship between feminism and postfeminism within a subgenre of films I have categorised as “postfeminist historical women’s films.” Postfeminist historical women’s films, as I have defined them, are films that: have been produced since the early 1990s and were thus produced within a postfeminist cultural context; are set in a historical period prior to the mid-1990s, and; actively engage with questions of women’s roles, feminist thought, and women’s dissent, both personal and political. While other scholars have compellingly considered how the relationship between feminism and postfeminism functions within postfeminist chick flicks that have a contemporary setting, there has yet to be a careful examination of how historical women’s films contribute to, and also challenge, popular understandings of both feminism and postfeminism. Indeed, while some aspects of feminist thought are deployed to support postfeminist priorities within these films, the historicised settings of the texts simultaneously facilitate more squarely feminist perspectives on themes such as equal rights or the politics of speech.

To elucidate these observations, I consider how four specific strands and concepts of feminist thought have been deployed within a broad range of postfeminist historical women’s films; these strands are liberal feminism, theorisations of the politics of speech, socialist feminism, and the sameness/difference debate as manifested in feminist approaches to the female body. The first four chapters provide brief histories of each of these strands respectively, in order to locate postfeminist historical women’s films in relation to the rich and diverse histories of feminist thought. The analysis of the films then focuses on the relationship between feminism and postfeminism, teasing out how the narratives draw on both feminist and postfeminist rhetoric, and demonstrating how the similarities between certain aspects of feminist and postfeminist thought promote understandings of feminism that are supportive of postfeminist logic more broadly. Simultaneously, however, the analysis also highlights the tensions between feminist and postfeminist thought, suggesting that the feminist sensibilities that find expression in these films cannot be fully contained by the postfeminist sensibility that underwrites them.
The final chapter takes a different approach, as I explore the relative absence of care feminism within the postfeminist historical women’s film. While the chapter is framed in terms of debates about care that have arisen within academic feminism, analysis of the films indicates that postfeminist prioritisation of autonomy and independence has silenced the radical possibilities offered by care feminism. Thus, my research canvases not only the strands of feminist theory that are deployed within postfeminist historical women’s films, but also the strands of feminist thought that are antithetical to postfeminist concerns and priorities, and are thus relatively absent in these films, and in postfeminist popular culture at large.

The privileging of certain strands of feminist thought, and concomitant silencing of others, evident within this subgenre of films is significant, as it suggests that it is a particular version of feminism, that of the empowered individual whose priorities centre on the public sphere, which dominates mainstream postfeminist popular culture. By investigating the ways that different strands of feminist theory are, and are not, referenced within a broad range of postfeminist historical women’s films, this research demonstrates both the limitations of and extant possibilities for postfeminist engagement with feminism.
Declaration

I, Jessica Taylor, declare that this thesis contains only sole-authored work, some of which has been accepted for publication under sole authorship.

The bibliographic details of this article are:

Sections of the article appear primarily in Chapter Three and briefly in the Introduction of this thesis.
The writing of this thesis has been the most intellectually challenging experience of my life, and its successful completion is due to the unbreakable web of support that has enveloped me over these past four years. Writing this thesis has changed me, and I would not be who I am today without the support and guidance of the following people. This thesis is dedicated to them.

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Introduction: Feminist Histories and Postfeminist Historical Women’s Films

As a young girl, and then a teenager, I was never really interested in “bonnet dramas,” “period films” or “heritage films.” “How boring,” I thought to myself, “a film where women simply call on each other all day, and wait to be approached by Mr Right (as they always were) for a proposal (which they always accepted) in order to succeed at womanhood (by being married). No thanks.” If the film in question was set later than the Victorian era, but still qualified as “historical,” my reaction was similar: “Watching a movie (that was often depressing) about something awful that happened to women ‘back then’? Pass.” My indifference to these films and their content meant that for a long time I missed out on the humour, the sense of solidarity, and the strong female characters contained within women-focused historical films. By resisting not only fictional period films, but also films that were based on a true story, I perhaps also, for a long time, missed out on an alternative version of feminist histories, of my political and intellectual histories.

Once I was shown Niki Caro’s *North Country* (2005) in a high school health class, however, my perspective began to shift. The film depicts the rampant sexual harassment at a Minnesotan mine site that led to the 1975 filing of the first ever sexual harassment class action lawsuit. I remember going home in a sickened fury and describing to my Mum the awful discrimination faced by the women at the mine. I was shocked at how recently this historical event had occurred. It was not so far in the past that women were wearing corsets and sitting at home waiting for their lives to happen; it had happened in my own mother’s lifetime, and she could have been subject to similar, institutionally sanctioned experiences. Such a forceful reminder that, collectively, we were still dealing with a way of thinking that assumed that women should not work, were not as good as male workers when they did work, and that they did not belong in the public sphere, stunned me. The feelings of dismay provoked by the film proved to be an important step in my journey to claiming a feminist politics, and it is perhaps unsurprising that I have subjected *North Country* to sustained analysis within this research. Indeed, my first viewing of this film could be considered a foundational moment in my feminist scholarly life, when I started to
realise how important, and how affectively powerful, the telling of women’s history on film could be.

Significantly, in the original drafting of this introduction I was tempted to separate my past self from my present self, as though we were two different people, and to lament that the viewing of *North Country* was not yet enough to convince my past self of the need for a feminist politics. In keeping with the logic of self-improvement that governs postfeminist discourse, within this original narrative my younger self was excised from my present self, and portrayed as requiring liberation from its own inadequacies. While the postfeminist requirement for self-improvement often takes the female body as its focus, it is possible that the same narratives of and pressures for self-improvement circulate within academia and other professional areas. Certainly, my narrative uncritically and inadvertently created a temporal distinction between “who I was then” and “who I am now,” rather than characterising the viewing of *North Country* as part of my incremental journey towards feminism. It was also drawn to my attention that this casually assumed separation between past and present was in fact replicating the very strategies at work in the films under consideration in this thesis. My initial instinct to represent myself in this way points to the power of postfeminist rhetoric and priorities, and how they shape the ways we can know both ourselves and our own personal histories.

This relationship between postfeminism and history is becoming increasingly significant in contemporary western culture, as evidenced by the growing prominence of women’s history films. As Maggie Andrews has argued,

> [s]ince the 1980s, and especially in the last 20 years, women’s history, in popular culture if not necessarily in the academy, has become increasingly mainstream, no longer ‘hidden from history’ (Rowbotham 1977). . . . The popularity in recent years of biographies and autobiographies in libraries and bookshops, and television and

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film biopics which focus upon the personalisation of the past are all manifestations of the phenomenon of women’s history as leisure and pastime.²

This mainstreaming of women’s history has been particularly prevalent in film; indeed, there have now been so many women’s history films produced that I have categorised them as their own subgenre: the postfeminist historical women’s film. Briefly, I categorise as postfeminist historical women’s films any film that is imbued with a postfeminist sensibility, depicts historicised feminist heroines (whether fictional or based on real events), and adheres to a cinematic genre that features female protagonists “who [are] trying to deal with the emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that [they are women]”³: in other words, the women’s film. It is through this combination of elements that my categorisation departs from previous studies of feminist, female and postfeminist biopics ⁴ as well as historical costume dramas,⁵ as I am categorising women’s biopics alongside works of fiction, and considering how the logic of the postfeminist historical women’s film informs them both. Indeed, while each of these concepts – postfeminism, history and the women’s film – have been considered individually or as part of another sub/genre,⁶ there has yet to be a wide-ranging examination of how

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For discussions of how history functions in film, see, for example: Deborah Cartmell and I.O. Hunter, “Introduction: Retrovisions: Historical Makeovers in Film and Literature,” in Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction, eds. Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto
these factors function when combined, a knowledge gap which this research addresses. I hope to show that the interrelationships between postfeminism, history and women’s films within this subgenre give rise to texts that are teeming with rich and contradictory ideas about such themes as gender and class equality, embodiment, care, and dependence, and as such, contribute to popular understandings of feminisms, feminist histories, and feminist thought.

Methodology

The films examined within this thesis are English-speaking, depict narratives primarily set in the US and the UK (the two exceptions being Joe Wright’s *Anna Karenina* (2012) which is set in Russia, and Bruce Beresford’s *Bride of the Wind* (2001), which is set predominantly in Austria) and cover a range of historical periods from the eighteenth-century to the early 1990s. They include big-budget Hollywood films (such as Steven Soderbergh’s *Erin Brockovich* (2000)), big-budget British films (such as Joe Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice* (2005)) and smaller-budget, independent UK films (such as Nigel Cole’s *Made in Dagenham* (2010)). Importantly, the collection of films I analyse within this thesis is a combination of box office smashes, modest box office successes, and commercial failures. This analysis of box office successes alongside commercial failures is a result of my decision to interrogate the films based on their narratives and shared themes, rather than their economic output. While an argument can certainly be made that it is the economic success of a film that indicates its alignment with contemporary norms and discourses, I contend that the films produced within a certain period, regardless of economic success, are still drawing on the norms and


discourses that shape a particular society, and thus indicate a particular engagement with cultural concerns, ideas and priorities.

I have limited my study to these parameters for several reasons, and acknowledge that these specifications necessarily curb the possibilities for this study’s generalisability outside of these cultural contexts. Firstly, and perhaps most banally, these parameters were established due to accessibility. British and US films are highly accessible to, and enjoyed by, Australian viewers; most, if not all, of the films in this study had a cinematic release in Australia, and were then released digitally, as well as on DVD and BluRay. Furthermore, given that films produced within the US and the UK make up a substantial percentage of the films released in Australia,\(^7\) they contribute in important ways to the cultural concerns and priorities of the postfeminist Australian context.

Secondly, there is both a similarity to, and difference between, US and British cultures, that brings the global (and perhaps globalising) discourse of postfeminism into sharp relief. By this I mean that the US and the UK share some key cultural markers, particularly a deployment of neoliberal forms of governance,\(^8\) that both facilitates and normalises postfeminist discursive practices. Simultaneously, however, there is a lack of uniformity of culture both between, as well as within, the US and the UK that indicates the flexibility and malleability of postfeminist discursive practices to make meaning across cultures and countries. Ideas of class and race, for example, function to different extents and with different ramifications in each country. Given that these social hierarchies necessarily inflect and influence the texts produced within, and stories told by, each country, a comparison between the films produced in each culture thus indicates the competing priorities and concerns that shape both the US and the UK and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Australia.

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And finally, I would argue that US and British cultural products have the greatest reach of western cultures. Because of this reach (as a result of Britain’s colonial past, and the US’s role as a cultural, if no longer economic, superpower), British and US cultural products arguably inform, and are informed by, the broader social discourses shaping western cultures – in this particular case, feminism and postfeminism. Examining films produced in the US and the UK thus facilitates an exploration of how postfeminist thinking circulates within, and indeed informs, two significant western cultural contexts.

My initial screening process for postfeminist historical women’s films to include in this thesis was without an analytical framework; I had noticed the increasing numbers of women’s historical films being produced, and watched a few of these films (initially Made in Dagenham, Phyllida Lloyd’s The Iron Lady (2011) and Cary Fukunaga’s Jane Eyre (2011)) to see if there were any patterns between them. My only criteria were that the films were historical, not made for television, and featured a female protagonist(s) who could broadly be considered feminist, or at least feminist-inspired. In other words, a protagonist who, in some way, whether small and personal, or large and public, recognised and sought to undermine or subvert systemic inequalities faced by women. The viewing of these initial three films was random – each had been brought to my attention by various peers and colleagues, and for different reasons: Made in Dagenham because it depicted socialist feminist activism as joyful; The Iron Lady because of its Oscar buzz, and Meryl Streep’s subsequent win for Best Actress; and Jane Eyre because of Jane’s position as one of feminism’s most important literary heroines. Through watching these films, I was reminded of, and then re-watched, films I had seen several years earlier – Niki Caro’s North Country (2005), Mike Newell’s Mona Lisa Smile (2005) and Pride & Prejudice – each of which seemed to be drawing on feminist ideas in order to make meaning. Each film I watched seemed to link to or suggest another film, either thematically or through the actresses involved, and the more films I watched, the more I noticed that the films tended to cluster around the broad ideas or priorities of particular strands of feminist theory.

In order to expand my corpus, and investigate these clusters further, I traced the careers of the actresses in each film, and found many more historical films I was not familiar with. Pride & Prejudice, for example, led me to Saul Dibb’s The Duchess (2008) and Joe Wright’s Anna Karenina (2012) via the career of Keira Knightley, as well as

I also searched beyond the actresses presented in the films I had already watched, researching films that reflected the key themes that seemed to be recurring in the films: women’s social and economic independence and equality (as exemplified by Penny Marshall’s *A League of Their Own* (1992)), women’s equality in the workplace, women’s voices and access to speech, the female body, women’s adultery, the possibilities of care, and women’s access to education. Not all of these themes are interrogated in the following thesis, but they provide a brief snapshot of the recurring priorities of women’s historical films in the 1990s and beyond. Undertaking a thematic search of historical women’s films also drew my attention to commercial failures, such as Bruce Beresford’s *Bride of the Wind* (2001) and Marshall Herskovitz’s *Dangerous Beauty* (1998) (a film not investigated in this thesis); such films are still part of a cultural milieu that uses feminist discourses to make historical events and fictions meaningful, and are thus shaped, to some extent, by these feminist discourses. Despite their failures, these films still offer insight into the ways that feminist priorities are being negotiated, challenged, and renegotiated within postfeminist popular culture.

Ultimately, I selected films for the ways they appear to engage thematically with aspects of feminist thought, and thus make meaning in a postfeminist cultural context. There are undoubtedly other films that can offer insight into the relationship between feminisms and postfeminism; it is my intention that the frameworks and findings of this thesis are both portable and expandable, and can thus be deployed within more comprehensive studies of postfeminist popular culture. Nevertheless, the films I have chosen are strongly emblematic of the mobilisation and/or silencing of particular strands of feminist thought in postfeminist texts, and indicate how the telling of women’s histories functions as a key cultural form within a postfeminist cultural context.
Feminism on Film

That narratives of women’s histories are being repeatedly staged through film, in particular, is significant. As Hilary Radner has compellingly argued,

[i]n many ways, cinema is perhaps the most logical arena in which to analyse dominant trends in popular thought, because feature-length films provide a dense articulation of the contemporaneous discursive formulations in which a film participates – formations that it may reproduce, modify and critique.\(^9\)

In other words, in order to succeed commercially, films must distil complex, but often familiar, ideologies into simplified, and yet meaning-rich, narratives and characters. Without a foundation built on engagement with familiar cultural discourses, a mainstream film would be poorly placed to either affirm or challenge broader cultural narratives about the film’s subject matter. Watching such a film would be like entering a conversation halfway through; while it might be possible to determine the subject of the conversation, the lack of context would make the subtleties of the conversation difficult to ascertain.

Furthermore, the economy demanded of film (its plot and character development unfolds faster than in other longer-form texts, such as the novel and television series) means that familiar tropes are often relied on to alert the audience to certain beliefs or expectations that are being referenced, so as to do away with lengthy explanations that might disrupt the flow of the narrative. Such tropes are often used as a shorthand to indicate a film’s position on potentially controversial or polarising debates; as Radner has further argued,

[a]s a lynchpin element in a system of media synergies, films often include highly schematic representations of contemporary discourses in which the tensions and controversies of an era are writ large.\(^10\)

Cinema thus provides a cultural space for the exploration and temporary resolution of the predominant ideological tensions that circulate within a particular society. Indeed,

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as specific genres often repeatedly restage and resolve the same concerns through
different narratives and characters, the prevalence or popularity of a particular genre
in a particular socio-historical moment broadly indicates the social issues with which
that society is preoccupied. Cinema is thus an important vantage-point from which to
track and interrogate cultural trends; its centrality to contemporary western culture
further means that, for many people, cinema may construct “the most compelling
accounts” of a culture’s particular preoccupations.

Given that the feminist movement was one of the most significant political
movements of the twentieth century, it is perhaps unsurprising that feminist politics
has become a popular issue to explore within cinema; indeed, the relationship
between film and feminism has a long history. Significantly, this relationship is
characterised by consternation over how it is best conceptualised; as B. Ruby Rich
asserts,

there is uncertainty over what name might characterise that
intersection of cinema and the women’s movement in which we
labour, variously called “films by women,” “feminist films,” “images
of women in film,” and “women’s films.” All are vague and
problematic.

This difficulty over naming the relationship perhaps indicates how the popularisation
of feminism on film has resulted in its multiplicity; as different facets of feminist
thought are used in competing and contradictory forms across contemporary western
popular culture, there perhaps cannot be one fully-encompassing explanation of
feminism and film, or feminism on film. This does not mean, however, that we should
not try to explain the relationship between feminism and film as it pertains to specific
genres and subgenres, or the ways that it can be indicative of broader intellectual
histories. Rich, for example, uses the term “cinefeminism,” and explains that this was a
term used to describe the broad field of film and feminism that began in the 1970s.

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11 See: Basinger, A Woman’s View, 11; 18; 190, and Christine Gledhill, “The Melodramatic Field: An
Investigation,” in Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film, ed. Christine
12 Vivian Sobchak, “The Insistent Fringe: Moving Images and Historical Consciousness,” History and
13 B. Ruby Rich, Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement (Durham: Duke
University Press, 1998), 62. See also: Teresa de Lauretis, “Guerilla in the Midst: Women’s Cinema in the
before it evolved into feminist film theory.\textsuperscript{14} In contrast, Tara Brabazon, in her examination of the changing role of Miss Moneypenny in the Bond franchise, uses the term “filmic feminism” to explain how feminism functions on film, arguing that while “it may seem a clumsy or awkward phrase, it acknowledges a political framework that stands for and against specific discourses, world-views, and values.”\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, the term “fictional feminism,” coined by Kim Loudermilk in her study of American bestselling novels, indicates that the feminism presented in such texts is considered fictional not only because “it is in fact made up, a fiction,” but also because “it grows out of the fictional narratives of popular culture.”\textsuperscript{16} Taken together, these terms point to various implications of feminism in cultural texts, both in terms of production and representation, and indicate that the depiction of feminism on film is simultaneously a political framework as well as heavily mediated by popular cultural discourses surrounding “what feminism is and can be.”\textsuperscript{17}

The centrality of feminist theory to these films is evidenced through the way that many of the protagonists are popularly identified as feminist, regardless of whether they are historically positioned prior to the second-wave feminist movement, during the second-wave feminist movement, or after the second-wave feminist movement. While I recognise that feminists and feminist organisations certainly existed, agitated, and succeeded in their political goals far earlier than the second wave, I specify the second wave of the feminist movement as my anchoring point in order to acknowledge the particular and widespread influence that second wave feminism had and continues to have on popular culture and vice versa and how, for many people, “feminism” \textit{is} the second wave.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, it is likely that many people’s first experiences of feminist thought are through popular cultural depictions of, or

engagement with, a diverse range of second wave theories and beliefs, whether those
theories are being supported or lampooned.\textsuperscript{19}

The influence of feminist thought on this subgenre also extends to the way the
films tend to cluster around specific strands of feminist theory, thus mirroring the
multiplicity of the feminist movement. For example, as Chapter One of this thesis
explores, certain films “do” liberal feminism, and Chapter Three considers how liberal
feminism’s ideological rival, socialist feminism, is evident in other films. Reading the
films in terms of the feminist concepts they appear to be embracing also helps make
evident the strands of feminist thought that have \textit{not} made the transition to popular
cultural films; Chapter Five, for example, considers how certain films, through their
reliance on neoliberal notions of subjectivity, indicate a squeamishness about the
political possibilities inherent in care ethics and care feminism. These films as a group
thus offer a unique perspective on how competing feminisms are staged,
remembered, or forgotten within postfeminist popular culture more broadly, providing
a complex picture of how feminist thought circulates in contemporary western culture.
It is important to note, however, that my interpretation of these films as mirroring
specific strands of feminist theory is not a claim for categories of feminist thought
separated by impermeable boundaries; rather, such retrospective labelling (of both
the films \textit{and} the strands of thought I argue they are informed by) functions as a
shorthand through which to indicate that approaches to women’s equality have been,
and continue to be, underpinned by a multiplicity of (sometimes competing) ideas and
motivations.

\textbf{Postfeminism}

In order to be classified as a postfeminist historical women’s film, I have
determined that a film must adhere to several criteria. Firstly, it should have been
produced and released during or after the early 1990s. While my definition of
postfeminism does not follow the scholars who define postfeminism as “an historical
shift after the height of Second Wave Feminism,”\textsuperscript{20} the explanation of the 1980s as a

\textsuperscript{19} See Hollows and Moseley, “Popularity Contests,” 2; Kristy Maddux, “Winning the Right to Vote in
2004: Iron Jawed Angels and the Retrospective Framing of Feminism,” Feminist Media Studies 9, no. 1

\textsuperscript{20} Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, “Introduction,” in New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism
also: Nina K. Martin, “Down with Love and Up with Sex: Sex and the Postfeminist Single Girl,” Jump Cut:
period in which the gains made by the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s were increasingly eroded is an instructive framework for determining the parameters of my research. For, if we can broadly accept that the 1980s, and particularly the late-1980s, were, as Gisela Kaplan has provocatively argued, “dead years”\(^{21}\) for feminist activism for a variety of reasons, not least the swing to neoliberal conservatism heralded by the US Presidency of Ronald Reagan and the British Prime Ministership of Margaret Thatcher,\(^ {22}\) then it perhaps makes sense that, by the dawn of the 1990s, the feminist vocabulary prevalent in the 1970s had been reimagined. In other words, after two decades of battle over feminist values and goals, where the 1970s belonged to the Left, and the 1980s increasingly swung to the right (although, significantly, the 1980s saw the flourishing of academic feminism), by the 1990s there had perhaps emerged an uneasy equilibrium where feminism and antifeminism existed side by side, often in the same cultural texts. This tentative truce between feminism and antifeminism is particularly evident within Penny Marshall’s 1992 *A League of Their Own*, which I identify as one of the earliest postfeminist historical women’s films to be released. *A League of Their Own*’s status as a key, if not the first, postfeminist historical women’s film, is based not only on its release date, which coincides with the beginning of the period of increased interest in women’s history as leisure and pastime as identified by Maggie Andrews,\(^ {23}\) but also the “entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist themes”\(^ {24}\) that permeates the film. Indeed, the film’s depiction of historical protagonists that were coded as feminist, alongside depictions of casual and humorous retro-sexism, an idea I shall return to later, indicate the film’s postfeminist sensibility, and thus paved the way for the postfeminist historical women’s film to be born.


\(^{24}\) Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149.
Significantly, *A League of Their Own* (and the other postfeminist historical women’s films explored in this thesis) differ markedly from Jane Campion’s ground-breaking 1993 film *The Piano*. *The Piano* tells the story of Scottish widow Ada (Holly Hunter), who is sent, with her daughter Flora (Anna Paquin), by her father to New Zealand to marry landowner Stewart (Sam Neill). Ada is mute, and communicates with her daughter through sign language and playing the piano. Upon arrival in New Zealand, Stewart sells Ada’s piano to his neighbour, Baines (Harvey Keitel), who then barters sexual favours with Ada for its return. When Stewart discovers the (now-consensual) sexual relationship between Ada and Baines, he cuts off her finger, and has Flora deliver it to Baines. In a surreal moment where Stewart “hears” the mute Ada’s voice while attempting to rape her while she convalesces, he understands that Ada can never be happy with him, and permits her to return to Scotland with Baines. While on the boat, Ada signals for the piano to be tipped overboard and, while the piano is falling, deliberately entangles herself in one of the ropes attached to the piano. Initially calm, the drowning Ada makes a decision to free herself, and is saved. Once the couple have arrived in Scotland, Ada learns to speak again, suggesting a happily ever after. The film, however, subverts this happy ending by finishing the film by returning to the sunken piano, and imagining Ada drowned, still attached to her piano.

The subject of significant feminist debates upon its release, and even years later, *The Piano* arguably moved debates about feminism and feminist theory back into mainstream popular culture, through its resonance with “a new feminism . . . in which the need for women specifically is to achieve erotic fulfilment in the heterosexual realm.” Indeed, the film became “part of a larger discourse on representations of women,” as questions of feminism, women’s sexuality, and women’s identity were debated within contemporary popular culture. *The Piano* also

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reworked the historical woman’s film in subversive ways, not only challenging traditional relationships aligning speech with agency and silence with passivity (an idea I explore in greater depth in Chapter Two) and “advancing a feminist discourse of clothes.”


but also through the film’s “double discursivity, [which] refuse[d] to delimit the boundaries between the aesthetic force of the visual and the political message of the narrative.”


In other words, *The Piano* subverted the norms of the woman’s film through creating an aesthetically beautiful film that offered a complex and political engagement with questions of gender, speech and silence, dominance and control, and desire and agency. Furthermore, this double discursivity resulted in a film that simultaneously adhered to a traditionally linear plot, while also including “non-linear, symbolic relationships” that disrupted the possible meanings of the narrative. It is this critically subversive engagement with the form of the narrative, as well as the gender relations that inform the narrative, that marks *The Piano* as feminist.

In contrast, *A League of Their Own* and the other postfeminist historical women’s films explored in this thesis lack the political and disruptive (and politically-disruptive) edge of *The Piano*, due in no small part to the postfeminist sensibility that characterises them. Instead, postfeminist historical women’s films contain their critiques of gender inequality within traditionally linear plots that detail the disadvantage, hard work and then success of the heroine/s, often concluding with clear resolutions that foreclose the possibilities of multiple interpretations. *The Piano*, then, while an important cultural touchstone, especially for women’s cinema, offers an engagement with the form and structure of storytelling unrivalled by postfeminist historical women’s films, and is thus not included within my subgenre.

Importantly, the 1990s also heralded an academic and scholarly focus on notions of “postfeminism.”


By restricting my definition to films produced during and after the early 1990s, I am thus able to focus on films that have been produced alongside theories of postfeminism. Overall, I argue that such films were produced in a

postfeminist cultural milieu, with narratives likely to be inflected by a postfeminist sensibility and its resulting priorities and concerns.

My understanding of postfeminism has been significantly shaped by Rosalind Gill’s influential article, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” where she explains that “the transformations in feminisms and transformations in media culture – and their mutual relationship” are at the centre of debates around postfeminism. Where other scholars have argued that postfeminism “suggest[s] the end of one era and the beginning of another” or acts as “a kind of anti-feminism,” Gill contends that postfeminism is “best thought of as a sensibility that characterises increasing numbers of films, television shows, advertisements and other media products,” whose discursive practices feature “the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them.” Such a conceptualisation works to focus on, as Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young have explored, the continuity between feminism and postfeminism, rather than the conflict, and also acknowledges Loudermilk’s argument that as “feminist politics simply occupy too large and important a place in the cultural milieu . . . [t]he media must simply address the issue in some way.” In other words, given that media culture typically frames contemporary concerns as a bipolar for and against debate, feminism has been obliged to co-exist, interminably, with its opposite in popular culture.

Gill’s observation that feminist thought continues, in some way, to circulate within postfeminist texts, is also more optimistic than other conceptualisations of postfeminism. Imelda Whelehan, for example, argues that postfeminism 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.

33 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 147-166.
34 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 147. See also: Hollows and Moseley, “Popularity Contests,” 7.
35 Cook, Screening the Past, xii.
38 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149. For an alternative conceptualisation, see: Whelehan, “Remaking Feminism,” 161.
39 Ferriss and Young, “Chick Flicks and Chick Culture,” 34.
40 Loudermilk, Fictional Feminism, 26.
41 Whelehan, “Remaking Feminism,” 160.
While there is of course merit to this argument, particularly the claim that “social dissatisfaction with heterosexual and gendered role scripts”\textsuperscript{42} is broadly understood as indicative of a feminist sensibility, Whelehan’s concomitant denial that feminism continues to circulate in postfeminist rhetoric is limiting, particularly to my study. Thus, by emphasising continuity over conflict, and acknowledging that feminist modes of thinking occupy a relatively stable position in contemporary western society, Gill’s formulation provides scholars with a flexible, but theoretically powerful position from which to examine how feminism, and the idea of feminism, continues to function in contemporary western cultural practices and popular cultural formats.

Alongside the “entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist themes,”\textsuperscript{43} Gill has also identified several characteristics consistent with a postfeminist sensibility. These are:

- femininity as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification; emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference.\textsuperscript{44}

Therefore, in addition to having been produced and released during or after the early 1990s, in order to qualify as a postfeminist text a film must also engage with at least one of the characteristics listed above, although such films often demonstrate several of these features simultaneously.

One of the most visible postfeminist characteristics deployed within the postfeminist historical women’s film is a “focus on individualism, choice and empowerment.”\textsuperscript{45} Given this sub-genre’s prioritisation of “plucky heroines valiantly resisting oppression,”\textsuperscript{46} the visibility of a postfeminist narrative that emphasises the ability of an individual to achieve personal agency within an oppressive or openly discriminatory past is unsurprising. Indeed, this valorisation of empowerment, choice

\textsuperscript{42} Whelehan, “Remaking Feminism,” 160.

\textsuperscript{43} Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149.


\textsuperscript{45} Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149.

\textsuperscript{46} Garrett, Postmodern Chick Flicks, 131.
and individualism is the component of postfeminist thinking that is perhaps most reminiscent of feminist modes of thought, as it evokes a liberal feminist prioritisation of independence and legal equality for women. This evocation of liberal feminist ideals is often mobilised to undermine the need for radical or political activism within a postfeminist cultural milieu, and is particularly evident through the way that the dominant narratives of postfeminism have replaced liberal notions of women’s “independence” with the more benign concept of “empowerment.” The similarities between these terms allow for, and perhaps encourage, slippage from a politicised liberal discourse to the depoliticised, and more individualised, rhetoric of postfeminism.

It is the similarities and slippages between liberal feminist and postfeminist thought that form the basis of the first chapter of this research, which takes as its focus three films which are characterised by a liberal feminist sensibility: Penny Marshall’s 1992 depiction of the inaugural season of All-American Girls’ Professional Baseball League, *A League of Their Own*; Mira Nair’s 2009 biopic of Amelia Earhart, *Amelia*; and Phyllida Lloyd’s 2012 biopic of Margaret Thatcher, *The Iron Lady*. Each of these films depicts female protagonists who have entered into, and succeeded in, traditionally male-dominated professional arenas (sports, aviation, and politics, respectively). By considering how these protagonists fulfil the aspirations of liberal feminist rhetoric, particularly through their expression of personal independence and challenge to sexism, I tease out the similarities between liberal feminism and postfeminism, and suggest that liberal feminism was the predominant precursor to postfeminism. The chapter also considers how the relationship between liberal feminism and postfeminism is complicated by the films’ deployment of the makeover paradigm and retro-sexism, and how the films’ collective reliance on the flashback structure works to establish a liberal feminist sensibility as a distinctly historical phenomenon.

While postfeminist narratives of choice and empowerment often invoke the language and ideals of the (liberal) feminist movement, and thus always contain the

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seeds for the possibility (however slight) of political challenge or dissent, Shelley Budgeon has noted that within a postfeminist cultural context,

[m]aintaining a coherent empowerment narrative consisting of autonomy, individuality and personal choice requires a denial of the effects that external influences have on the realisation of individual success and as such the classed and raced constitution of the ‘successful’ feminine subject is obscured. In other words, postfeminist narratives assume the universal attainability of personal empowerment for all subjects. The denial of sexual, racial and class privileges – which continue to confer tangible rewards on certain subjects – ensures that empowerment is configured as a choice, whereas the disempowerment of individuals is coded as a personal failing, rather than a failure of social institutions to address continuing inequalities.

Importantly, this focus on treating individuals as responsible for the success of their own lives – and the concomitant denial of the reality that empowerment is often dependent upon opportunities produced by one’s class, race and gender identity – is not unique to postfeminist discourses, but is also central to notions of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism, as explained by Julie Stephens, usually refers to the way liberal doctrines of individual responsibility, small government, and a self-regulating market resurfaced in the 1980s and were given a new global inflection and reach. The idea of neoliberalism also signals transformations in the labour market such as the increasing casualization of labour, economic degradation, the

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global mobility of capital, the privatisation of state services, and changing patterns of paid and unpaid work by women.\textsuperscript{52} Importantly, neoliberalism also has an ideological component; as Stephens has further argued, neoliberalism is a “system of beliefs that idealises the ‘entrepreneurial citizen engaged in paid employment,’”\textsuperscript{53} whose “reach extends far beyond the market.”\textsuperscript{54} In other words, neoliberalism is a political and social discourse that extends the model of the marketplace into the private sphere, prioritising concepts of individualism and paid employment as key to full citizenship, while also assuming a universal equality where all citizen-workers are able to live and work free from public or private constraint. The centrality of individualism to both neoliberalism and postfeminism is extraordinarily significant, and works to undermine the key feminist commitment to collective action to effect political, social and personal change.

A particularly striking consequence of this prioritisation of individualism within both postfeminist and neoliberal discourses is the way that political responses to social and institutional inequalities are often individualised. Indeed, postfeminist media texts often, as Budgeon has argued, “reduce politics to the right of self-expression,”\textsuperscript{55} thereby encouraging a focus on the self and personal growth to the exclusion of wider political engagement or broader political goals. This focus on individual self-expression as a means to resolving collective issues is particularly evident within Joe Wright’s \textit{Pride & Prejudice} (2005) and Cary Fukunaga’s \textit{Jane Eyre} (2011), two films which form the basis of the second chapter of this research. Known and valorised for their outspokenness and the strong narrative voice within their respective classic source texts, both Lizzie Bennet and Jane Eyre are inevitably implicated within a feminist politics of speech and silence. Importantly, however, both of these films were produced in a period characterised by increasing economic disparities; \textit{Pride & Prejudice} was released three years prior to the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, when the boom in the housing market made it increasingly difficult for young people

\textsuperscript{52} Julie Stephens, \textit{Confronting Postmaternal Thinking: Feminism, Memory, and Care} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), x.
\textsuperscript{55} Budgeon, “The Contradictions of Successful Femininity,” 289.
to leave their parents’ homes and enter the housing market, while *Jane Eyre* was released during the post-financial crisis recession. Both *Pride & Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* are uncharacteristically anxious adaptations of their source texts, gesturing towards the influence of global economic conditions on popular cultural texts. Given this context of uneasiness, the politics of speech and silence that are traditionally central to both of these narratives becomes more emphatic within these adaptations, as a means by which a beleaguered postfeminist individualism and autonomy can be shored up and reasserted. This chapter therefore pays particular attention to the ways that speech and silence function within *Pride & Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* to mediate, and then tentatively resolve, the anxiety with which the films are imbued.

Significantly, the anxiety that is central to *Pride & Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* also gestures to an increasing scepticism about the alleged benefits of a neoliberal global economy and political order. Importantly, this scepticism does not appear to extend to postfeminism; while Gill has noted the “powerful resonance between postfeminism and neoliberalism,” an alignment evidenced by my discussion in Chapter One and to a lesser extent Chapter Two, there is also an increasing number of films which work to question this relationship. This is particularly evident within films that explore a socialist feminist sensibility, as socialist feminism can be understood as liberalism’s, and thus neoliberalism’s, ideological rival. While both neoliberalism and socialist feminism focus on labour participation and experiences in the workforce, the notion of collective action that is central to successful socialist feminist action is inimical to neoliberalism’s prioritisation of individualism and the need for individuals to adapt to constantly changing work environments.

The positive depiction of socialist feminist collective action in postfeminist historical women’s films thus forms the basis of the third chapter of my research. By investigating how three postfeminist historical women’s films are “doing” socialist feminism – Steven Soderbergh’s 2000 film *Erin Brockovich*, Niki Caro’s 2005 *North Country* and Nigel Cole’s 2010 *Made in Dagenham* – I tease out the ways in which socialist feminism is popularly understood and, according to the chronology of the films, perhaps becoming more palatable and accessible. Indeed, when the films are considered chronologically, a shift in the way that socialist feminism is performed

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56 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 163.
becomes evident; from a decidedly individualised attempt at socialist change in *Erin Brockovich*, to a more collective form of agitation in *Made in Dagenham*, and tied together by *North Country*’s depiction of the difficulty of forming collectives. The films are also significant for the way that they address the realities of the working-class, and the affective dimensions of this reality; in each of the films the representation of the experience of the working-class woman (the single working mother, the underpaid working woman, the working woman subject to class-based discrimination) works to justify the anger of their respective protagonists.

This repeated staging of successful collective socialist feminist action, demonstrated in *Made in Dagenham*, *North Country* and *Erin Brockovich*, is significant for its ability to complicate neoliberal ideals and explore an alternative, collectivised subjectivity. That the films are able to mount this critique of neoliberalism through the increasingly explicit rhetoric of socialist feminism indicates the progressive possibilities that can be pursued within postfeminist texts. In other words, a text’s postfeminist sensibility does not entirely disqualify it from presenting a significant critique of the dominant neoliberal order; while postfeminist texts are often understood as regressive and conservative, the films analysed in this study indicate that they may yet support progressive interventions into social norms and ideologies. Given the commercial success of the films, it is therefore reasonable to anticipate a continued production of historical collective-action-based films in the coming years, and the cultural and political turn towards the Left that the production and popularity of such films perhaps indicates.

**History**

A significant reason for the popularity of films such as *Made in Dagenham* and *North Country* is their historical setting. Historical films are culturally significant texts,

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given that they can draw attention to, or facilitate the resolution of, contemporary concerns and priorities without needing to explicitly address them, such as Jane Eyre’s tentative resolution of recession-era anxieties. A historical setting featuring a historical protagonist is therefore the second criteria for categorisation as a postfeminist historical women’s film. This expansive delineation allows for depictions of “recent” women’s history to be included alongside depictions of feminist women from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, and for the similarities in the films’ ideological concerns to be drawn out. This approach also provides scope for a teasing out of the ways that historical settings, whether recent or distant, have significant ramifications for the ways in which feminist thought is incorporated into cinematic narrative, and to explore what this means for the ways that feminist ideas circulate within contemporary popular culture.

Importantly, the telling of history, particularly on film, is always shaped by and viewed through the concerns and preoccupations of the society in which it is told. This is particularly evident in postfeminist historical women’s films, a subgenre which uses, as Kristy Maddux has compellingly argued, “present-day ideologies and identities to understand the historical subject matter as it simultaneously uses the historical subject matter to reaffirm those contemporary ideologies and identities.” In other words, the feminism that is depicted as historical within these films is not only understood through the lens of postfeminism, but is simultaneously deployed to shore up contemporary postfeminist priorities.

Furthermore, through the repeated staging of feminist concerns, this subgenre also “consolidates” what is popularly considered to be “known” about feminism and the feminist movement in a postfeminist cultural milieu. This consolidation of knowledge about feminism occurs through the collective representation of two intertwined themes: feminism as a historical phenomenon and feminism as having already achieved its political goals for equality. These ideas about feminisms and

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feminists are woven implicitly throughout the films, both individually and collectively, particularly through their subject matter: who they are about, what issues they canvas, how the problems are resolved. The films thus collectively provide an aggregate image of how “feminism” – both as a historical and a contemporary phenomenon – is understood according to a postfeminist sensibility, marking this subgenre as extraordinarily useful for understanding the symbiotic relationships between feminism and postfeminism.

One of the clearest messages about feminism according to the postfeminist historical women’s film is that feminism is a historical phenomenon. The repeated presence of the feminist protagonist within postfeminist historical women’s films indicates that the historicised setting is her rightful setting; her presence in, and challenge to, the social and political structures of the past is culturally and temporally distanced enough from the present that her identifiably feminist perspective is considered non-threatening to the status quo. Indeed, the historicised nature of this subgenre is what allows her to be so unapologetically feminist, even if never labelled as such within the films.

This relationship between feminism and history is also central to the “double entanglement”62 of feminist and anti-feminist themes that characterises postfeminist logic, allowing on the one hand, as Pam Cook has argued, “a celebration of undeniable victories achieved; on the other, registering the occlusion of women’s issues as other political priorities take precedence.”63 Postfeminist logic therefore dictates that feminism’s (past) successes have rendered it (as a social movement) no longer relevant to contemporary western society. This false idea of the achievement of women’s equality further indicates how a postfeminist sensibility relies on a narrative of historical progress in order to justify its simultaneous celebration and disavowal of the feminist movement.

Indeed, popular history is often predicated on a narrative of progress, wherein the present formation of a particular society is compared favourably to a past that was

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somehow inferior, and the future is expected to improve upon the progress already made. This is a critically important discursive practice upheld by governments and other social and political institutions for, as Clare Hemmings has argued, “[w]hich story one tells about the past is always motivated by the position one occupies or wishes to occupy in the present.”64 Thus, a focus on how past events and people have made contemporary society “what it is” – allegedly more free, equal and socially stable – works to obscure the existence of inequalities and social issues that continue to plague contemporary western societies, such as poverty and racial and sexual discrimination and harassment. It is this depiction of “the past” as somehow worse than the present (whether in terms of gender, sexual or race relations, technological advancement, or a more generic understanding of “freedom”) that characterises the progress narrative.

The progress narrative’s reliance on a picture of the past as categorically worse than the present contributes to the idea that the past and the present must be discursively disconnected, that there is a distinct separation between the experiences of “then” and “now.” Chilla Bulbeck has explored this separation in her investigation of the ways that young women remember the feminist movement. She argues that

[t]he women’s movement [is] safely located in ages so ‘dark’ – [when] women were tied to the home, forced to have multiple children, could not get an education or go to work – the[se] times lose their connection with any present-day reality, while rendering contemporary injustices trivial by comparison.65

In other words, not only is there a disconnect between issues of the past and present, but there is also a corresponding diminishment of continuing inequalities in contemporary society. By this I mean that the depictions of women’s experiences in the past can, within this logic, become a cultural shorthand for what oppression “really is,” which may have the effect of invalidating concerns about the inequalities and injustices faced by contemporary women.

While the historical setting of these films may serve to demarcate the “real” oppression of the past from the “equality” of the present, they also have the potential, I argue, to make the cultural blind spots of the contemporary society in which they are produced evident to their audience. A particularly striking example of this occurs in

64 Hemmings, Why Stories Matter, 13.
instances where the postfeminist historical women’s film raises the possibility of women’s differences from, rather than similarities to, men. This tension between sexual sameness and difference within the narratives gestures to the broader difficulties of postfeminist and neoliberal discourses in engaging with the possibilities of difference. In this light, the final two chapters of this research explore how the possibilities of difference circulate within postfeminist historical women’s films, both in terms of corporeal difference (as is the focus of Chapter Four) and psychological, relational, or moral difference (as investigated in Chapter Five). The possibilities of biological differences between women and men is one of three competing approaches to bodily difference that informs Chapter Four’s analysis of Saul Dibb’s *The Duchess* (2008) and Rodrigo Garcia’s *Albert Nobbs* (2011). Drawing on the sameness/difference debate, this chapter uses the feminist tropes of corsetry and rape to explore how popular cultural depictions of the female body are implicated within, and indeed complicated by, wider feminist and postfeminist debates about corporeal bodily differences. The sameness/difference debate, as it circulates within the postfeminist historical women’s film, can be separated into three distinct approaches to the body: “progressive”, which evokes the radical feminist argument that there are significant and meaningful biological differences between men and women, and that these differences should influence how women’s equality should be conceptualised; “constructed”, a perspective influenced by deconstructive approaches to the body, wherein biological differences are made meaningful only through particular discursive practices; and “conservative”, a postfeminist approach to the body that emphasises women’s biological difference to men in terms that support and justify continued structural inequalities between the sexes. Influenced by each of these strands, *The Duchess* and *Albert Nobbs* thus draw attention to the ambivalence that underscores understandings of the female body within the postfeminist cultural context.

In contrast, Chapter Five takes women’s relationships as its focus, and considers how the circumscribed depiction of these relationships (including familial, romantic and friendship) indicates postfeminism’s inability to engage with the politically radical possibilities offered by care feminism. In order to tease out this idea, I firstly consider how female friendships are depicted in Mike Newell’s *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), drawing out the ways that female friendship is positively conceptualised in the postfeminist historical women’s film. Significantly, female friendships are indicative of accepted
notions of women’s relationality, wherein women’s subjectivities are understood to be formed through relationships with others. 66 This section of the chapter details how women’s relationality, in the context of female friendship, is not considered as a threat to the protagonists’ broader adherence to the postfeminist narratives of individual personal growth, and can in fact act to facilitate personal growth. In contrast, the second section of the chapter takes “adulterous mother” films as its focus, in order to draw attention to the fundamental incompatibilities between the politics of postfeminism and care feminism or care ethics. By focusing on Joe Wright’s Anna Karenina (2012) and Bruce Beresford’s Bride of the Wind (2001), this section examines the figure of the adulterous mother, defined in this study as a married woman who does not engage in an extra-marital affair until after she has borne her husband’s child. The adulterous mother figure potentially elucidates the tensions between the postfeminist fantasy of autonomy and the realities of intersubjective relationality that are highlighted by feminist care theory, but the films avoid dramatizing this tension by concentrating on the protagonists’ own need for freedom and autonomy and sidelining or rendering invisible the needs of their dependent child/ren. The possibilities for a relational self are thus denied within these films, and with it, the potential for women’s equality based on difference.

Women’s Films

While the possibilities for reconceptualising women’s equality in terms of their difference from men is circumscribed within a postfeminist cultural context, and the consistent historicisation of the feminist protagonist works on some level to “tame” and “divest feminism of its radical potential,” 67 it is important to acknowledge the ways that the feminist protagonist is always accompanied by a vast depth of feminist thought from which her position derives, and thus always contains within her the potential to challenge, subvert and transgress the social order. Indeed, as Kaplan has compellingly argued, “[d]espite substantial differences in viewpoints and concerns, at


its core, feminism is an argument for women’s autonomy and signifies a standpoint of dissent.”\(^{68}\) Importantly, this dissent finds an ally in a cinematic form that, as Jeanine Basinger has compellingly argued, “generously empowers a sex that society has relegated to secondary status”\(^{69}\): the women’s film. I have therefore categorised the films of this subgenre as “women’s films” in order to indicate that they actively engage with questions about women’s roles, feminist thought, and female dissent more broadly.

The naming of these films as “women’s films” is strategic on several levels. Firstly, it locates the films within a wider history of woman’s films, where female protagonists, based on the access the viewer is granted to her thoughts and feelings,\(^{70}\) have simultaneously challenged and upheld contemporary gendered concerns and priorities. This is particularly evident within the “self-sacrificial” films Basinger has categorised as “maternal melodramas,” like *Stella Dallas* (1937) or *Imitation of Life* (1934/1959), as the films’ depictions of “hideous sacrifice, which proclaim that this is the way it is, also subversively reveal to women the hypocrisy of the repressive social system in which they are imprisoned.”\(^{71}\) By drawing attention to the suffering of a woman protagonist who has somehow failed to adhere to the lofty standards of desirable womanhood within a particular socio-historical context, these films make visible (and thus open to challenge) the discriminatory attitudes and practices that led to this “failure” of womanhood. By categorising the postfeminist historical women’s film in relation to the woman’s film, I thus acknowledge the destabilising possibilities inherent in the woman-centred narratives of both the woman’s film and its successor, and further indicate the significance of the female protagonist in making visible the discriminatory cultural mores and institutions of a particular socio-historical moment. Just as the woman’s films of the 1930-1960s indicated the narrowness of women’s acceptable social roles – Basinger has argued compellingly that “these are films that tell the truth, but only because they are about the unhappiness of women”\(^{72}\) – the postfeminist historical women’s film also draws our attention to changing

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\(^{69}\) Basinger, *A Woman’s View*, 16.

\(^{70}\) See: Laplace, “Producing and Consuming the Woman’s Film,” 139; Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 2; Basinger, *A Woman’s View*, 20.

\(^{71}\) Basinger, *A Woman’s View*, 208.

\(^{72}\) Basinger, *A Woman’s View*, 7.
understandings of feminism and feminists, women’s history more broadly, and desirable conceptions of womanhood. Through its invocation of the tradition of the woman’s film, this research is situated within a wider history of feminist film scholarship that seeks to comment critically on the ways that female protagonists indicate both support for and a challenge to the status quo.

Secondly, the naming of the films as “women’s films” indicates a certain level of political engagement, similar to the function of the title “women’s studies” in an academic setting. In the same way that Joan Scott has argued that, “the term ‘women’s history’ proclaims its politics by asserting (contrary to customary practice) that women are valid historical subjects,”73 so too does the designation “women’s films” illuminate the political possibilities inherent in drawing attention to the significance of the female subject and protagonist. This is particularly evident in the ways that postfeminist historical women’s films are able to depict their protagonists in both public and private political struggles; The Duchess, for example, draws attention to the role Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire, played in the political landscape of her life – which included campaigning for the election of future Prime Minister Charles Grey – while also depicting the politics of her marriage, and the way the institution of marriage denied her personal and bodily autonomy throughout her life. Indeed, by drawing attention to the experiences of women both publicly and privately, and often within the same film, the postfeminist historical women’s film contributes to the legitimising of women’s history, and ensures that women continue to be seen as valid social and historical subjects.

Thirdly, women’s films allow for the positive depiction of a particularly visceral form of affect, a strategy most notable in socialist feminist films. Given that postfeminist historical women’s films have evolved from the women’s films of the 1930s to 1960s – films described by Basinger as “cautionary tales of a particularly desperate stripe, [that] contain real passion, real anger”74 – it is perhaps unsurprising that affect continues to be central to new forms of women’s films. Indeed, as Stephens has compellingly argued, “[f]eminist history has long been predicated on an interest in

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74 Basinger, A Woman’s View, 6.
the emotional lives of women,“\textsuperscript{75} and these films thus provide a culturally-sanctioned outlet which, through expressing the emotional lives of historical and fictional women, could be said to legitimise or validate the expression of women’s emotions more broadly.

The final reason I have categorised these films as women’s films is because they lack, as did the woman’s films of Basinger’s study, defined generic features. Indeed, as Basinger identified, woman’s films are defined as such based on a film’s placi[ing] at the centre of its universe a female who is trying to deal with the emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman.\textsuperscript{76}

This vagueness of definition means that the categorisation of “women’s film” can act as an umbrella term, under which seemingly disparate genres – such as comedy (\textit{A League of Their Own}), political biopic (\textit{The Iron Lady}), realist drama (\textit{North Country}) and classic adaptation (\textit{Jane Eyre} and \textit{Pride & Prejudice}) – gather. By applying a broad definition for what can be included as a “women’s film,” I am thus able to consider more generally how various strands of feminist thought are being conceptualised and deployed within postfeminist popular culture. Indeed, the clustering of films with aesthetic and generic differences around specific strands of feminist thought indicates how the trend towards postfeminist women’s histories is not confined to a niche subgenre; rather, the flexibility of these concerns across genres indicates the established and familiar nature of feminist logic in postfeminist popular culture.

One example of a genre that is included under the term of “women’s films” is that of the chick flick. As Ferriss and Young have identified, the chick flick illustrate[s], reflect[s], and present[s] all of the cultural characteristics associated with the chick postfeminist aesthetic: a return to femininity, the primacy of romantic attachments, girlpower, a focus on female pleasure and pleasures, and the value of consumer culture and girly goods, including designer clothes, expensive and impractical footwear, and trendy accessories.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{76} Basinger, \textit{A Woman’s View}, 20.
\textsuperscript{77} Ferriss, and Young, “Chick Flicks and Chick Culture,” 35. See also: Garrett, \textit{Postmodern Chick Flicks}, 4.
There are thus particular generic conventions, often aesthetic, which indicate that a film is a chick flick. Significantly, however, not all women’s films are chick flicks. While the distinction may seem minor, it is significant in terms of how the films are marketed, and thus which audiences are assumed to be interested in the films’ content. I would classify some women’s biopics, for example, as women’s films rather than chick flicks, as biopics are often imbued with a gravitas not often associated with chick flicks. Indeed, given that films like *The Iron Lady*, *North Country* and *A League of Their Own* take as their focus women who challenged social and institutional norms, they arguably “engage, directly or obliquely, the issues, ideas, data, and arguments of the ongoing discourse of history.” The films are thus located within a broader discourse of public history, and are imbued with a seriousness and dignity often not accessible to “chick flicks.” This is particularly evident through the way that they draw attention to the socio-political priorities and concerns of the time; the experience of the female characters in *A League of Their Own*, for example, is shaped by 1940s expectations of traditional women’s roles and the drama of the Second World War. Similarly, *The Iron Lady* depicts the influence that the 1984 National Union of Mineworkers’ Strike had on Margaret Thatcher’s leadership, her decision to take Britain to war with Argentina over the Falklands, and the continuing pressures of the Cold War. In contrast, films such as Joe Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice* and Cary Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre* can be considered “chick flicks” due to the way they depict “the primacy of romantic attachments [and] girlpower” of their protagonists. This prioritisation of romance and empowerment indicates a more “interior” women’s history (one which prioritises emotion and the private sphere) and is marketed to a predominantly female audience.

Another significant feature of the postfeminist historical women’s film that is shared with the woman’s film and the chick flick is the recurring appearance of a small number of lead actresses in multiple films within the subgenre. One such actress is Keira Knightley, who is the lead in three of the films I consider: she is Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride & Prejudice* (2005), Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire in *The Duchess* (2008), and Anna Karenina in Joe Wright’s *Anna Karenina* (2012). Knightley’s ascendency within the postfeminist historical women’s film epitomises Roberta

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78 Rosenstone, “The Historical Film,” 62.
79 Ferriss, and Young, “Chick Flicks and Chick Culture,” 35.
Garrett’s argument that “the resurgence of women’s genres [has] created a new generation of female stars associated with the new chick flicks”\(^{80}\); in this case, the postfeminist historical women’s film. Garrett argues that “[o]nce sufficiently established as bankable stars – via the new female-orientated cycles – their popularity then fuelled the demand for further female-centred and female-oriented productions.”\(^{81}\) In other words, the evolution of woman’s films into “new chick flicks” called for new leading ladies, the success of whom encouraged the production of similar chick flicks, which also sought to take commercial advantage of these women’s star power. As each actress’ profile grows, so too increases the number of similar chick flicks or women’s films in which she stars; hence, Knightley’s three period films in seven years, and two with the same director.

While Basinger’s study classified Bette Davis, Rosalind Russell, Joan Crawford and Betty Grable (among many others) as the faces of the original woman’s film,\(^{82}\) and Garrett identified “Cameron Diaz, Sandra Bullock, Reese Witherspoon and Renee Zellweger”\(^{83}\) as the stars of mid-noughties chick flicks, my research indicates that for the postfeminist historical women’s film,\(^{84}\) the new “bankable” stars are Mia Wasikowska, Julia Roberts (who was also named by Garrett as one of the contemporary stars of the “early 1990s”),\(^{85}\) Carey Mulligan, Sally Hawkins, Meryl Streep and of course, Keira Knightley. Mia Wasikowska is an Australian actress who appears in three of the films under consideration within this research; she is Jane Eyre in Cary Fukunaga’s Jane Eyre (2011), young pilot Elinor Smith in Mira Nair’s biopic of Amelia Earhart, Amelia (2009), and Albert Nobbs’ love interest Helen Dawes in Rodrigo Garcia’s Albert Nobbs (2011). Wasikowska also plays the title role in Sophie Barthes’ Madame Bovary (2015), a film not under significant examination in this research. English actress Carey Mulligan also appears in several postfeminist historical women’s films, including Joe Wright’s Pride & Prejudice (2005) and Lone Scherfig’s 2009 film An

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\(^{80}\) Garrett, Postmodern Chick Flicks, 66.

\(^{81}\) Garrett, Postmodern Chick Flicks, 66.

\(^{82}\) Basinger, A Woman’s View, 3-23.


\(^{84}\) While contemporary-based chick flicks are not within the scope of my research, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that the “bankable” female stars of the mid-2010s are Jennifer Lawrence and Emma Watson, as well as comic actresses such as Rebel Wilson, Melissa McCarthy, Amy Poehler and Tina Fey.

\(^{85}\) Garrett, Postmodern Chick Flicks, 66.
Education (also not under consideration in this research). Further, Mulligan plays Bathsheba Everdene in Thomas Vinterberg’s Far From the Madding Crowd (2015), and is the lead character, Maud, in Sarah Gavron’s Suffragette (2015). In taking the militant collectivity of the first wave of the feminist movement as its subject matter, the latter film indicates that collectivised feminist histories are becoming increasingly visible, and supports my argument that they may contribute to the undermining of narratives of neoliberal individualism more broadly.

The repeated appearance of these stars in similar roles is significant; the films are often popularly understood as “feminist,” and so their presence contributes to a “feminist economy” of sorts. This is because, given their recurring roles, “any single viewing of the star in a film is imbued with an accumulation of significance made up . . . of her former roles”86; in this way, the assumption of roles by certain actors automatically marks the characters they play as “feminist.” Each of these actresses has developed a persona87 that marks them as able to depict “plucky heroines valiantly resisting oppression,”88 a certain spiritedness in the face of systematic and structural discrimination, and a strength that makes believable their pushing or dismantling of the boundaries that have historically demarcated what women can and cannot do, or what women are or are not entitled to. This feminist economy perhaps accounts for Keira Knightley’s significant success in historical films, as opposed to her more modest success in contemporary-based films. Indeed, perhaps because each of Knightley’s historically-based roles are imbued with the significance of the (feminist-inspired) historical roles that she has performed prior, there is an assumption of similarly feminist-inspired performances in future historical roles. In contrast, Knightley’s more contemporary-based roles are not laden with the same “accumulat[ed] significance.”89

In other words, Knightley’s participation in the feminist economy of postfeminist historical women’s films arguably ensures her success, as she repeatedly offers feminist (or feminist-inspired) protagonists to an audience invested in the telling of women’s histories.

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86 Laplace, “Producing and Consuming the Woman’s Film,” 146.
87 Basinger, A Woman’s View, 161.
88 Garrett, Postmodern Chick Flicks, 131.
89 Laplace, “Producing and Consuming the Woman’s Film,” 146.
Conclusion

The intertwining of these three elements – postfeminism, history, and women’s films – creates a rich and complex tapestry through which to investigate the position of feminism in contemporary popular culture. Through the adaptation of both classic texts and real events, these films provide an alternative to popular histories that remain focused on transactions amongst men. Indeed, the primary reliance on adaptations and “true stories” over original screenplays evidenced within this research (only Mike Newell’s *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003) is an original screenplay), indicates that some sort of “realist” historical credibility is paramount in this subgenre. By bringing the histories of significant women – whether the protagonists of the films, or the authors of the source texts – to mainstream attention, these films perhaps present “proof” of the oppression of historical women, and thus justify feminist interventions within the periods depicted.

Despite this reliance on a type of historical “credibility”, the films also act as an acknowledgement that the feminist movement was never, and still is not, monolithic. As a movement, it encompasses a variety of different viewpoints, some in direct contradiction with others. The following research seeks to interrogate this new subgenre of films, to consider how history, cinema and feminist theories are all inextricably intertwined within these compelling accounts of women’s history, and to draw out how feminism functions within a postfeminist cultural context. For those who are sceptical of the validity of women’s history films, just as I was, this research may also reveal what they are missing out on.

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Chapter One: “One’s Life Must Matter, Beyond All the Cooking and the Cleaning and the Children”: Liberal Feminism in A League of Their Own, Amelia and The Iron Lady

Since the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, liberal feminism has occupied a position of dominance within western capitalist democracies. More easily recognised and, perhaps more importantly, accepted, than other strands of feminist thought, liberal feminist approaches to equality have come to represent, at least within popular mainstream media, the default feminist position. As Andrea Dworkin has argued, “liberal feminism is the feminism that the media plays back to us.”¹ Based on the tenets of political liberalism, liberal feminism provides an institutionalised form of feminism that works to change the patriarchal system from within, by drawing on the rhetoric of rights and equality that have informed western democracy since the Enlightenment. Since the late 1980s, however, liberalism within the context of western democracies has been undergoing a fundamental ideological shift, into its “neoliberal” iteration. Characterised by increased globalisation, and an emphatic focus on the free market as the model for social and institutional organisation, neoliberalism prioritises the rights of the individual, and the individual’s personal accountability, over the responsibility of the state towards its citizens. Neoliberalism’s winding back of the state’s involvement in the lives of its citizens and sidelining of a rights discourse that has been distinctly embedded within a social justice movement functions to undermine the radical possibilities of liberalism and, more significantly, liberal feminism.

Significantly, neoliberalism’s individualist revision of liberal rhetoric is intertwined with a reworking of feminist rhetoric into its own depoliticised other: postfeminism. In the same way that neoliberalism prioritises an emphatic individualism and an assumption of equality, so too does postfeminism, a strategy that works to simultaneously celebrate feminism’s past, and obscure its continued

relevance for contemporary western society. In order to explore the ways that neoliberalism and postfeminism disavow the radical potential of liberal feminism, this chapter thus takes as its focus three films that prioritise a liberal feminist narrative: Penny Marshall’s *A League of Their Own* (1992), Mira Nair’s *Amelia* (2009), and Phyllida Lloyd’s *The Iron Lady* (2011). Each of these films depicts historical protagonists who are emblematic of traditional liberal feminist priorities, and all focus specifically on women who enter, succeed in and demand equality within the public sphere. Given that these films were produced within a neoliberal and postfeminist cultural context, however, they are also inflected with neoliberal and postfeminist priorities. By drawing out the ways that these films depict a liberal feminist narrative from within a neoliberal and postfeminist cultural context, this chapter thus seeks to explore how the tensions between liberal feminism, neoliberalism and postfeminism manifest within postfeminist historical women’s films as simultaneously political and depoliticised narratives.

The Roots: Liberal Feminism

Based in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberal ideals, liberal feminism as we know it is indebted to such thinkers as Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill. Radical thinkers for their time, Taylor Mill and Mill posited that the liberal doctrine of equality that structured their society should be extended to women, as

> [t]he principle which regulates existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to another – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and . . . it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.³

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Here, Mill and Taylor Mill acknowledge that women’s inequality is written into the very legislation that governs liberal society, and recognise that this legislation is symptomatic of a more foundational principle of bias against women. Any challenge to women’s subordinate social position, then, must be facilitated by an attendant challenge to the laws that enshrine such inequality.

Legislative change is thus figured as a cornerstone to liberal feminist ideologies; as H. Leslie Steeves has argued, “[m]ost liberal feminists . . . focus their efforts on creating and changing laws to promote women’s opportunities for intellectual growth and professional success.” In order to achieve such legislative change, liberal feminist rhetoric has required a close relationship with a liberal discourse of rights, which “assumes rational development is the highest human ideal and that the state should act to assure equal opportunities for all in pursuing this goal and associated ones.”

Given that western societies are arguably all based on some form of liberal governance, the liberal feminist deployment of a rights discourse to critique patriarchal society thus becomes intuitive to the broadest possible audience. This legislative focus of liberal feminism is often posited as its most significant strength, as changes in law can often result in changes in women’s social status, as well as their legal status. Indeed, liberal feminist action has successfully challenged a wide range of discriminatory practices across the Western world, resulting in the creation of anti-discrimination legislation designed to ensure women’s equality.

This prioritisation of legislative change, however, is often simultaneously considered liberal feminism’s greatest weakness. As Ruth Groenhout has

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5 Steeves, “Feminist Theories and Media Studies,” 100.

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acknowledged, “the notion of rationality on which liberal rights are based is not as gender-neutral as it seems.” In other words, when legislated notions of equality are reliant on gendered understandings of rationality to become meaningful, women’s equality becomes contingent on their ability to assume rational individualism as it has been defined and performed by men in the public sphere. Importantly, this gendering of equality in terms of “rational individualism” leaves uninterrogated the ways that women’s implication within relational networks of care often complicates both their access to roles associated with the public sphere and also their understanding of what is “rational”. Liberal feminism has thus become synonymous with expectations of women’s participation in the workforce, and the assumption that having a career is the greatest indicator of women’s independence and freedom. This is a limitation in liberal feminist thought dating back to the writings of Mill; as Sue Hekman reminds us, “[Mill] himself has argued, only women who can earn their own subsistence can be truly independent.” This ideal continues to flow through liberal feminist ideology, and is indeed reflected within the three films I consider later in this chapter. This focus on paid work as the marker of equality, however, often ignores the realities of working-class women and women of colour, the majority of whom have long undertaken paid employment but more often than not in a context marked by exploitation rather than equality. Viewing paid work as a marker of equality also ignores the experiences of women who do not work, especially while parenting or engaging in other types of care work, or due to illness or disability. Liberal feminism thus presents a very narrow view of what women’s equality could and should look like.

As a result of these limitations, liberal feminism has arguably held a fraught position within recent feminist thought. While its challenge to legal equality may be considered successful in many ways, others decry its other failures, particularly the

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ways that, as Michael Kaplan has argued, “the revolution is already built in” to liberal forms of governance. In other words, liberal feminist forms of agitation are containable within the liberal state; the logic of liberalism allows it to innovatively accept protest and change, to acquiesce to specific demands of the marginalised, while ensuring that its base ideologies remain intact. For example, women’s equality may have been established through legislation as a result of the second wave feminist movement, but has ultimately fallen far short of its intended outcome: pursuing practicable equality for all women. Zillah Eisenstein has drawn attention to this tension when she argues that

> [t]he contradictory nature of legal reform for feminists lies in this fact that it can deradicalise the potentially subversive nature of feminism by instituting limited gains, and at the same time it challenges woman’s oppression by affecting woman’s consciousness of herself as a person with certain rights.\(^{12}\)

For Eisenstein, despite liberal feminism’s unpopular position amongst particular theorists and theoretical positions, there is thus a radical or revolutionary potential within this particular feminist approach. This potential becomes realisable within the melding of two distinct political positions; as Loretta Kensinger has argued,

> [w]aver ing between liberal feminism’s commitment to liberalism and its subversion of liberalism produces a tension that appears unresolvable from the categorical point of view. It becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish what is feminist in this position from what is liberal.\(^{13}\)

In other words, while liberal feminism’s familiarity may be an intuitive position from which feminists might start, it is the untenability of the position of liberal feminism that encourages the radicalisation of its practitioners. Through an engagement with liberal feminism, Kensinger’s and Eisenstein’s logic suggests, the inability of liberal


feminism to address women’s experiences more broadly becomes the basis from which to engage in more revolutionary aims.

The Evolution: Neoliberalism

While liberal feminism offers the potential for a more radical engagement with inequality, liberalism has broadly given way to a new, depoliticised, iteration of liberal governance: neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as explained by Nick Couldry, is the range of policies that evolved internationally from the early 1980s to make market functioning (and the openness of national economies to global market forces) the **overwhelming** priority for social organisation.¹⁴

This prioritisation of the market as the ideal model for social, economic and political organisation has had significant ramifications for the citizens of late-capitalist western democracies. Firstly, on the macro level, in the wake of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, equality is broadly considered to have been achieved. Significantly, this assumption of equality has facilitated the withdrawing of the neoliberal state from welfare programs for, according to the logic of neoliberal equality, individuals are responsible for their own health and safety. Indeed, as Nancy Fraser has argued, “neoliberalism [has] authorised a sustained assault on the very idea of egalitarian redistribution.”¹⁵ States across the globe have de-emphasised their responsibility to ensure equal distribution of resources, for each individual allegedly has equal access to success and resources within a neoliberal cultural context.

On a more individual, micro level, this notion of equality as “achieved” is paired with the neoliberal characterisation of the state’s citizens as “entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating,”¹⁶ who should be able to thrive within the presumed equality of late capitalism. Importantly, this focus on the self as an “entrepreneurial actor” works to amplify the traditional individualism of political liberalism. Ideal neoliberal citizens are thus expected to adhere to this notion of the

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self as an unencumbered individual worker, regardless of the particularly gendered responsibilities to others one may carry, an idea that is explored more fully within chapter five of this thesis. This emphatic individualism also has important ramifications for the characterisation of failure or struggle within a neoliberal cultural context. Indeed, given that all individuals are assumed to be self-sufficient, a lack of independence becomes an individual problem or “failing.” This is an important strategy that is central to neoliberalism's platform of depoliticisation, for as Betty McLellan has passionately argued,

[w]hile the focus is kept on the individual, there is no room for analysis of the system that causes the misery of so many individual people and families, nor of the effects of that system on different categories or groups of people.\(^{17}\)

On both a micro and macro level, then, neoliberalism functions through both governmental policy and social discourse in order to emphasise individualism, obscure continuing inequalities and valorise the market as the ideal social structure.

This shift to neoliberalism has also had significant ramifications for the evolution of liberal feminism to neoliberal feminism. Catherine Rottenberg has argued, using Facebook CEO and author Sheryl Sandberg as her case study, that the neoliberal feminist is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women. This same subject is, however, simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care. . . . The neoliberal feminist subject is thus mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair.\(^{18}\)

Here, Rottenberg has clearly outlined the liberal feminist characteristics that are enhanced within its neoliberal translation – individualism and an awareness of sex

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discrimination – as well as the aspects of liberal feminism that are no longer considered pertinent within a neoliberal cultural context: the interrogation of the social, cultural and economic forces that impact one’s ability to move through the world. In other words, the individualism and independence that is so central to traditional liberal feminism are successfully translated to neoliberal understandings of “feminism” and the feminist subject, while the radicalising aspects of liberalism and liberal feminism are forgotten.

Importantly, neoliberal feminism is just one of the responses to gender relations within neoliberalism. The other key position is that of postfeminism which, through its simultaneous celebration and disavowal of feminism, offers a compelling framework through which to view postfeminist historical women’s films. Given that the narratives of each of the films are historicised, postfeminism offers a conceptual framework through which to account for both the positive depictions of feminist thought within the film, as well as the contemporary priorities that act to undermine this feminist rhetoric. Due to the “double entanglement” of postfeminism, however, neither feminist approaches nor antifeminist approaches ultimately trump the other within these films; rather, they coexist uneasily side by side. Nevertheless, I contend, along with Joanne Hollows, that postfeminism’s roots are within liberal feminism, functioning as it does as the alleged achievement of liberal feminism’s goals, such as equality between the sexes, prioritisation of women’s role as workers (in order to support consumerism), and a general focus on women’s movement within the public sphere.21

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21 See: Joanne Hollows, “Can I Go Home Yet? Feminism, Post-Feminism and Domesticity,” in Feminism in Popular Culture, eds. Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley (Oxford; New York: Berg Publishers, 2006), 113. Another explanation of postfeminism’s foundations is offered by Hilary Radner, who argues that postfeminism has been primarily influenced by “neo-feminism . . . a strand of feminine culture which develop[ed] out of the 1960s with a set of ideas and practices that are not a consequence of feminism, but rather constitute another . . . reaction to the same conditions that produced second-wave feminism.” Given that neo-feminist rhetoric prioritises consumerism and women’s sexual availability as the key strategies through which personal empowerment is achievable, the links between liberalism, the neoliberal market and postfeminism remain clear in both Radner’s and Hollows’ definitions. See: Hilary Radner, Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks and Consumer Culture (New York; London: Routledge, 2011), 3-4, 6-7.
Thus drawn from the same political and philosophical foundation, liberal feminism, neoliberalism and postfeminism intertwine with and resist each other in significant ways. In the ensuing discussion, I critically investigate how the postfeminist priorities of personal empowerment, the makeover paradigm and retro-sexism form a framework through which the liberal feminist ideals of independence and equality become meaningful in *A League of Their Own*, *Amelia* and *The Iron Lady*. While depictions of liberal feminism within these films may be restricted to these postfeminist concerns, it is from within these parameters that a liberal feminist critique of postfeminism emerges, thus revealing the simultaneous alignment of, and friction between, liberal feminist and postfeminist rhetoric. Given that each of the films also deploys a flashback structure, a cinematic device not seen as predominantly within other clusters in this subgenre, I will also explore how the flashback emphasises the differences between the past and the present, thus facilitating both liberal feminist and postfeminist approaches to the reading of feminist histories.

**Biopics by Women Directors**

The first of the films that I will be exploring, and arguably the first of the postfeminist historical women’s films, is Penny Marshall’s 1992 comedy, *A League of Their Own*, a film loosely based on the inaugural season of the All-American Girls’ Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL). The AAGPBL was founded in 1943 in order to facilitate continued public interest in baseball while the men’s league was briefly suspended, due to the United States’ entry into World War II. The film is thus set predominantly in 1943, although bookended by the undated “present” when the League is inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. The narrative follows two sisters, Dottie Hinson (Geena Davis) and Kit Keller (Lori Petty) as they try out for, and are selected for the Rockford Peaches team. Focusing largely on the difficult relationship between Dottie and Kit, the film also depicts the personal growth experienced by members of the Rockford Peaches team, as well as the initial difficulties and sexism faced by the fledgling League and its players.

Secondly, Mira Nair’s 2009 drama *Amelia* depicts the life of Amelia Earhart (Hilary Swank), the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, amongst many other significant flying feats. Structured through a flashback narrative that is shaped by Amelia’s final flight, the film follows Amelia from the beginning of her public flying
career, and uses transcripts from the *USS Itasca* to dramatise Amelia’s mysterious final moments alive. The film places particular emphasis on Amelia’s relationship and marriage to publisher and publicist George Putnam (Richard Gere), as well as her alleged affair with colleague Gene Vidal (Ewan McGregor). *Amelia* also depicts the publicity obligations placed on Amelia throughout her life, making clear that it was the careful maintenance of her image and celebrity that facilitated Amelia’s financial ability to keep flying.

Thirdly, Phyllida Lloyd’s *The Iron Lady* (2011) is a biographical film of Britain’s first female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher (Meryl Streep). The film is set in contemporary Britain, when Baroness Thatcher is an elderly lady struggling with dementia and hallucinations, and tells the story of Margaret Thatcher’s rise to power in flashback episodes. This switching between the past and the present allows the film to depict both the trajectory of Thatcher’s career – in which the gender and class-based prejudice she faced is emphasised – as well as the struggles of her illness in later life. Taken together, this narrative structure works to create a sympathetic and even rehabilitating portrayal of a controversial figure.

Importantly, each of these three films is biographical, and they thus work to recall significant episodes of women’s history for a contemporary cultural context that may have forgotten them. Through their success in traditionally male-dominated fields, the women depicted in these films offered new possibilities for other women; as Carol Pierman has asserted about the women of the AAGPBL (although it is equally true of Amelia Earhart and Margaret Thatcher):

> [b]y challenging norms of sexuality and femininity even to the extent that they did, AAGPBL players, like other women who were the first to toil in occupations usually designated male, offered women a new set of role models and feasibilities. Players in the AAGPBL had much in common with women entering other occupations where typically the work is done by males. Not only would they have to perform what most think of as a “man’s job,” but they would have to alter the reality of what people see when they watch women at work.\(^{22}\)

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Indeed, it is their success in the public sphere that makes the women of these films such compelling protagonists within the neoliberal cultural context; as historian Judith Smith ruminates on the decision to produce a film about Amelia Earhart, “[t]hey found Earhart compelling because she seemed to present a contemporary female ideal: successfully competing on previously male terrain while remaining an object of male desire.”23 Dottie, Kit, Amelia and Margaret, according to the films, relied simply on themselves – their own skill, and their own steely determination – in order to achieve great feats. These women are thus excellent examples of both liberal feminists and postfeminists, as they were independent individuals who were empowered to act by their own decisions, while at the same time, this empowerment is depicted as divorced from any attempt at broader political change for other women; feminist achievement is thus figured as a very individualised experience.24

Significantly, each of these films was also directed by a woman, a feat not replicated within any of the other clusters I explore in this research. The fact that the films most focused on liberal feminist narratives are directed by women is noteworthy, especially given that film directing continues to be a remarkably male-dominated profession. Indeed, in its 2015 annual “Celluloid Ceiling” report, the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University found that in the 250 highest-grossing US-produced films of 2014, “[w]omen accounted for 7% of directors.”25 That all these liberal feminist narratives have been directed by women suggests a continuing affinity between the struggles of the historical protagonists and those of contemporary women directors. Arguably, these films provide a cultural space for female directors to publicly celebrate qualities that have presumably assisted them to succeed within a profession in which they are remarkably outnumbered.

Independence

One of the liberal feminist qualities that broadly aligns with postfeminist priorities, and is thus depicted within these films, is personal independence. Not dissimilar to the postfeminist prioritisation of empowerment – both involve the

exercise of personal agency – independence is a central aspect of liberal feminist ideology, as it indicates that a woman has both economic and personal control over her own life and, as a result, that she is free.\(^{26}\) Significantly, to be “independent,” for example, is defined as “[n]ot depending upon the authority of another, not in a position of subordination or subjection; not subject to external control or rule; self-governing, autonomous, free.”\(^{27}\) In contrast, to be “empowered” is defined as a person, group of people, etc. having the ability or confidence to control one’s life or circumstances, especially as gained from an awareness of or a willingness to exert one’s rights; self-confident, independent.\(^{28}\)

These differences are slight, but significant. According to these definitions, independence is figured as a state of being that is already achieved; one is already free from subordination and subjection. In contrast, empowerment is figured as the possibility for independence; one has the potential to be independent, but it is conditional on having “confidence or willingness to exert one’s rights.”\(^{29}\) There is thus an individual responsibility intrinsic to the very definition of empowerment that indicates its affinity with postfeminist and neoliberal rhetoric more broadly. The definition of independence does not have the same self-responsibility figured within it; while independence often comes from inherited fortune or sheer luck, there is nothing to suggest that independence is not borne of collective struggle. There is thus a radical potential in the term “independent” and its narratives that is not mirrored in the term “empowered” and its narratives, and it is from these differences that a critique of postfeminism can emerge. Indeed, this radical potential arguably haunts these films, suggesting that independent women are far more powerful than their newer, empowered counterparts.\(^{30}\)


\(^{30}\) It is important to acknowledge that the terms “independence” and “empowerment” have different meanings within different contexts. Within feminist international development scholarship and
The differences between independent women and empowered women become particularly striking when the early independence of *The Iron Lady*’s Margaret Roberts is compared to the relative disempowerment of *A League of Their Own*’s Kit Keller. Margaret’s personal independence is established from early in her life when, upon being proposed to by her then-boyfriend Denis, responds as follows:

MARGARET: I love you so much, but I will never be one of those women, Denis, who stays silent and pretty on the arm of her husband, or remote and alone in the kitchen, doing the washing up for that matter.

DENIS: We’ll get a help for that –

MARGARET: No. One’s life must matter, Denis, beyond all the cooking and the cleaning and the children. One’s life must mean more than that. I cannot die washing up a teacup. I mean it, Denis. Say you understand.

DENIS: That’s why I want to marry you, my dear.

This is a particularly feminist moment within the film, as it clearly relies on the internal logic of liberal feminism in order to make meaning. Indeed, this particular exchange illustrates the liberal feminist assumption, often criticised by other strands of feminist theory, that equality means entering and competing in the public sphere, and “assuming . . . that what is most worth having and doing is what men think worth
Indeed, if we accept that domesticity has been traditionally coded as “women’s work,” then Margaret here is forcefully resisting and challenging that ideal. She appears to accept that “women’s work” means “lesser work,” and considers that her life should be worth more, should perhaps be coded as “male.” What begins as an acknowledgement of the marginalised position of women in this society, however, then becomes the cry of an individual seeking something better for herself, a plea to remain in the public (male) sphere. Margaret is emphatic that her mother’s life will not become her own, implicitly asserting a liberal feminist belief that, as Wendell articulates, “the value of women as human beings is not instrumental to the welfare of men and children and that it is equal to the value of men.” Given that this film is told in flashback form, and the audience already know who Margaret Roberts becomes, the trajectory of Margaret’s life thus becomes meaningful through the rhetoric of liberal feminism, as her personal independence facilitates both her ambition and her challenges to the sex- and class-based discrimination she faces.

While Margaret may be figured as already independent from early in her life, it is a rhetoric of personal empowerment that informs the character development of Kit Keller in *A League of Their Own*. The progression of Kit’s development is significant for the way she is consistently contrasted against Dottie’s already achieved independence; given her sister’s confidence and composure, Kit’s lack of empowerment is thus framed as a personal failing, rather than indicative of broader social norms that consistently stifle women’s independence. Indeed, from the outset, the film makes it clear that Kit feels dwarfed by Dottie’s baseball skills, beauty and general popularity. After a local game in which Dottie has hit the winning run, Kit is furious not only with herself for striking out earlier and Dottie for winning the game, but also the loutish spectators who taunted her:

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33 There are many examples of Margaret facing discrimination throughout the film: as a young woman, her peers taunt her with the name “Miss Hoity-Toity” for her commitment to working at the family’s store, rather than going to the movies with them; even when Prime Minister, one of her Ministers ridicules her to another Minister when, after she refutes the common notion that she is “out of touch” with the common people by reeling off a list of margarine and butter prices, he whispers “Grocer’s daughter.”
KIT: “Good thing your sister bailed you out.” “Kit, why don’t you get your sister to teach you how to hit?” “Kit, why can’t you be beautiful like that sister of yours, Dottie?”

Kit clearly struggles to define herself, and be seen by others, as separate from and equal to Dottie. Kit’s feelings of inadequacy are further cemented when it is made clear that her invitation to attend the baseball league tryouts is conditional on successfully convincing Dottie to attend. The tension between the two sisters increases throughout the film, and dramatically so when Dottie, the catcher of the team, tells team manager Jimmy (Tom Hanks) that Kit can no longer pitch out the game. Kit, once again incensed with Dottie, and provoked by a quip from smart-mouthed Doris (Rosie O’Donnell), starts a physical altercation with Doris, and then sob to Dottie:

KIT: All I know is you could’ve backed me up today, instead of holding me back.
DOTTIE: I hold you back?
KIT: It’s like at home. It’s like if you’re here, then I’m not here.
DOTTIE: What does that mean?
KIT: I don’t know, I don’t know what I mean. I know I’m wrong. I know you’re right and I’m wrong. I know that. I just – I just get so mad! Why do you gotta be so good? Huh?

By drawing on Kit’s sense of helplessness and belief in her personal inadequacies, this exchange makes clear that Dottie plays a central role in Kit’s self-conception, and that Kit herself lacks empowerment. When Kit is pulled off the pitcher’s mound in the scene above, she believes it is because Dottie is trying to hold her back, not because her pitching is poor. Similarly, Kit believes it is Dottie’s influence that helped her get into the League initially; Dottie is thus the prism through which Kit’s successes and failures are refracted. Indeed, Kit’s intense focus on Dottie throughout the film means that she never has to take responsibility for her own life or her own self-improvement, because she can always blame Dottie for being too “good” and thus making Kit “so mad.” As a consequence of her dependency and disempowerment, however, Kit has no real conception of who she is outside of Dottie; she thus feels invisible in the face of Dottie’s successes, and resentful that she needs Dottie, at least in her perspective, in order to succeed.
In the aftermath of this exchange, Dottie asks League Manager Ira Lowenstein (David Strathairn) for a transfer, which he misinterprets as Dottie wanting Kit transferred to a different team. While Kit is initially livid with what she sees as Dottie’s betrayal, the transfer ultimately empowers Kit, as it provides her with the “confidence to control [her own] life.” Indeed, once she is physically separated from Dottie, Kit can no longer base her self-conception around being inferior to Dottie, and begins to take charge of her life. Kit’s new empowerment is evident in an exchange with Dottie after the final game of the World Series, where Kit has made the winning run for her new team:

DOTTIE: When do you think you’ll be coming home?
KIT: Well, some of the girls have been talking about staying around here, you know, and getting jobs. I really like it here.
DOTTIE: Christmas?
KIT: I don’t know.

Here, Kit is relaxed and happy as she is finally able to talk to her sister as an equal, rather than an idol. While the process of Kit’s empowerment has not been seen by the audience, given that Dottie is the film’s protagonist, it is clear that Kit is now empowered to make the choice to stay in Chicago, get a job, continue playing baseball, and cement her independence from her family, which is what she really wanted all along.

Importantly, the development of Kit’s character within this film is unique for the way her personal empowerment is focused on another individual, and thus divorced from broader issues of gendered inequality. While the other players also undergo personal growth throughout the film, these transformations are the result of the players’ new freedoms from gendered societal constraints that have previously shaped their lives. Mae (Madonna), for example, is an exotic dancer who refuses to go back to earning “ten cents so some slob can sweat gin all over me,” while Doris explains that she has been dating her “stupid . . . out of work” boyfriend because you know, none of the other boys ever – Always made me feel like I was wrong. Like I was some sort of a weird girl or a strange girl, or not even a girl, just because I could play. I believed them too, but not

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anymore, you know? I mean look. There’s a lot of us. I think we’re all all right.

Even though the women still face sexism while in the League, not least from their own team manager, their collective liberal feminist perspective acts as an intervention into these social discourses, and allows them to feel an optimism for the future. Given that the relationship between Kit and Dottie is one of the key sources of tension in the film, however, this prioritisation of Kit’s individualised, and depoliticised, empowerment narrative amongst the liberal feminist concerns exemplified by the other players thus indicates the ease with which slippages between liberal feminist and postfeminist priorities occur in postfeminist historical women’s films.

Perhaps the most significant differences between the independence narrative exemplified by The Iron Lady and the empowerment narrative in A League of Their Own is the role played by each trait. Independence, for example, is depicted as the foundation of Margaret’s success, it is the prerequisite needed for her successful incursions into the public sphere, and her ultimate influencing of Britain’s political future. In contrast, empowerment is the end point, at least within the film’s narrative, of Kit’s development. Given that empowerment narratives prioritise the internal transformation of the individual, they also work to obscure the broader social critique that is key to liberal feminist independence narratives. This is particularly evident within A League of Their Own, as while each of the other characters draw attention to the ways that social discourses have impacted and constrained their lives, Kit focuses solely on her relationship with Dottie. Importantly, however, within both of these films, independence and empowerment are figured as personal traits that are the responsibility of the individual.

In contrast, Mira Nair’s Amelia makes clear how women’s independence is always implicated within broader gendered discourses, and how it is always shadowed by the threat of excess. Amelia’s independence, like Margaret’s, is well-established throughout the film. The most notable example of her independence is the letter she writes to George on the eve of their wedding, in which she declares that “I may have to keep some place where I can go to be by myself now and then” and, furthermore, that she “must exact a cruel promise, and that is you will let me go in a year if we find no happiness together.” Such a letter indicates how highly Amelia values her independence, and how she is not willing to compromise this independence, especially
within marriage. Amelia’s repeated assertions of her independence, in combination with the fact that she is a woman who succeeds in the male-dominated field of aviation, thus indicates the liberal feminist sensibility that weaves through this film. However, this sensibility is in tension with the film’s postfeminism, visible through the film’s focus on Amelia’s courtship of the media and publicity, and her participation in the college lecture circuit in order to finance her ventures. This tension is evident primarily within a scene towards the end of the film, when Amelia meets with Gene Vidal, her colleague at the Aeronautics Branch and alleged lover, and the following exchange takes place:

GENE: You don’t read the papers?

AMELIA: Not unless someone makes me.

GENE: Well, someone should. They’re all saying you took recklessly dangerous solo flights for no earthly purpose other than publicity, meaning money. They also harp on a growing list of products you commercially endorse.

AMELIA: How thoughtless of me to do all this in a society where no one else is interested in making money. Present company included.

GENE: People viewing you as Lady Lindy, America’s Sweetheart of the Skies, the wife, mother, daughter, they all wish they’d had, would be helpful.

. . .

AMELIA: I’ve decided I’m resigning as your consultant at the Aeronautics Branch. The public linking of our names does more harm to that image of mine than everything else put together. And you, of all people, should know that whatever I do, I do so that I can fly. And I want to fly that beautiful bird as far as it will take me. I’m going to fly around the world, Gene.

Here, Gene makes clear that public opinion increasingly deems Amelia’s conduct, both in terms of her risk-taking flights and her courting of the media, as excessive and inappropriate. In this way, he anachronistically evokes the “media whore” discourse that is amplified by the social networking culture of neoliberalism and postfeminism. The “media whore,” as explained by Robert Payne, “is a common vernacular description of an individual perceived to inappropriately seek excessive media
attention.” However, the film critiques the arbitrary and gendered discourses of media whoredom through the rhetoric of liberal feminism when Amelia sarcastically notes to Gene, “How thoughtless of me to do all this in a society where no one else is interested in making money. Present company included.” Here Amelia notes that criticism of her behaviour, undertaken only so that she can keep flying, is unfair and hypocritical, with the implication that it is also gendered, due to the fact that she is a woman participating in the traditionally male-dominated areas of flying and commerce.

Amelia’s depiction by the newspapers thus makes visible how the postfeminist rhetoric of the media-whore is not only gendered, but an attempt to curtail the independence or personal empowerment of women whose strategic use of the media is personally beneficial, and thus “excessive” according to contemporary notions of femininity. Indeed, Amelia’s commercial endorsements are initially acceptable to the public at large, for she is an unknown name who has achieved an amazing feat. Nevertheless, once the initial excitement at her achievements recedes, and once her media and publicity engagements become a regular occurrence, Amelia is increasingly viewed as a money-hungry risk-taker, traits usually coded positively when associated with men, but negatively in relation to women. In moving from being an innocent media novice, to a skilled and strategic user of her name and brand specifically to make money, Amelia becomes positioned as ‘excessive’, and perhaps even masculine, in contrast to the prevailing ideals of femininity as “wife, mother and daughter,” that are expressed by Gene. Indeed, despite the fact that she has flown across the Atlantic Ocean twice, and broken many flying records, he suggests that the only publicly acceptable role for Amelia is that of “America’s Sweetheart of the Skies,” a role which relies on discourses of domestication to make her more palatable to an increasingly cynical diegetic audience.

Significantly for the scene, however, and perhaps a reminder of the film’s liberal feminist influence, is Amelia’s rejection of Gene’s advice, and subsequent affirmation of her independence. She declares that she will “fly that beautiful bird as far as it will

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take me,” making clear that the perspectives of a nameless and faceless public will not curtail her personal freedom. This scene thus gives forceful expression to Amelia’s liberal feminist sensibility; not only is she succeeding in the public sphere in a male-dominated environment, but she challenges the social discourses that would return her to the private, domesticated sphere. Through depicting both the rhetoric of media whoredom, as well as Amelia’s assertion of her independence, the scene thus makes clear the interconnections between postfeminist and liberal feminist sensibilities. While Amelia’s search for independence may be depicted from within a paradigm that equates women’s strategic use of the media with “excessiveness,” it is from a liberal feminist perspective of independence as a marker of women’s equality that significant critiques of this postfeminist paradigm can emerge. In some ways, then, the framing of liberal feminist concerns through a postfeminist paradigm can thus facilitate the challenging of postfeminist priorities.

Taken together, the three films thus reaffirm, and complicate, the centrality of women’s independence to liberal feminist rhetoric, and the relationship between liberal feminism and postfeminism. While The Iron Lady may provide an idealised depiction of women’s independence as a personal trait and prerequisite for success in the public sphere, A League of Their Own indicates how liberal feminist priorities can easily slip into the depoliticised postfeminist priorities of the inwardly-focused individual. In contrast, Amelia provides a depiction of women’s independence that is framed by postfeminist concerns. However, by making these postfeminist concerns explicit through the rhetoric applied to the “excessive” figure of the media whore, the film simultaneously challenges such perspectives, reinstalling a liberal feminist approach to the importance of women’s independence as proof of their equality.

The Makeover Paradigm

The notion that postfeminism forms the frame through which liberal feminism is made meaningful in these films, and through which liberal feminist critiques of postfeminist priorities emerge, also extends to the films’ treatment of the makeover paradigm. The makeover paradigm is one of postfeminist popular culture’s central characteristics, often deployed to amplify a character’s individualism and affirm the
postfeminist focus on the self as a “project.” Key postfeminist theorist Angela McRobbie has explained that the makeover paradigm can be understood as the transformation of self with the help of experts, in the hope, or expectation of improvement of status and life chances through the acquisition of forms of cultural and social capital.

While the makeover paradigm is understood as fundamental to postfeminist rhetoric, Joel Gwynne notes that it is hardly a new phenomenon. He specifies that

[m]akeover narratives emerged in the genre of the feature film long before the popularisation of reality TV programmes . . . both classical Hollywood cinema . . . and more recent productions . . . bear witness to the longevity of the commercial construction of the makeover as a ‘liberating’ process.

While this is true – and given that film is a visual medium, the makeover is a particularly useful strategy or shorthand for indicating a character’s personal growth or transformation – the postfeminist makeover contains within it a new focus on the alleged achievement of “female authenticity,” or revelation of the “true” feminine self through external change. While the liberation of the “true” self within postfeminist makeovers relies on the commodification of femininity, and an assumption that “the female body . . . is constructed as a window to the individual’s interior life,” the fact that the postfeminist makeover often takes, as Sarah Gilligan has noted,

a performative approach to gender – in which clothing, appearance, gestures, and utterances are rendered central to the construction

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37 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 156.
42 Winch, “Your New Smart-Mouthed Girlfriends,” 361.
43 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 150.
and transformation of gendered identity – [means that] it is also possible to view the makeover narrative in more subversive terms.\textsuperscript{44}

Indeed, while Gwynne has argued that the “makeover paradigm can be understood as toxic due to both its promises of (false) empowerment and its ubiquity,”\textsuperscript{45} I argue that the liberal feminist sensibility prevalent in both \textit{A League of Their Own} and \textit{The Iron Lady} complicates this equation, as the approach to makeovers within these films exposes, and thus undermines, the illusion of the liberated “true” self that is privileged within postfeminist makeovers.

\textit{A League of Their Own}, for example, mocks the makeover paradigm through the players’ attendance at charm and beauty school. While this is a brief montage prior to the beginning of the baseball season, and is not revisited later in the film, it is still significant for the way it puts forward a liberal feminist perspective that deems such a class unnecessary, not only because it places an additional burden on women’s careers and not men’s, but also because it is a burden that is unrelated to the job for which they have been hired. The alleged need for the players to attend charm and beauty school is first outlined by social commentator Maida Gillespie (Laurel Cronin) who, in a radio announcement that is voiced-over footage of the women at the tryouts, expresses anxiety that the women will become masculinised by playing baseball:

\begin{quote}
Careers and higher education are leading to the masculinisation of women, with enormously dangerous consequences to the home, the children, and our country. When our boys come home from war, what kind of girls will they be coming home to? And now, the most disgusting example of this sexual confusion, Mr Walter Harvey, of Harvey Bars, is presenting us with women’s baseball. Right here in Chicago, young girls plucked for their families are gathered at Harvey Field to see which one of them can be the most masculine. Mr Harvey, like your candy bars, you are completely nuts.
\end{quote}

The film thus makes it very clear that the women’s baseball league must tread a fine line between making the women successful baseball players (and thus making the league profitable), and ensuring the women adhere to appropriate forms of femininity while off the field. In order to combat this threat of encroaching masculinity, the

\textsuperscript{44} Gilligan, “Performing Postfeminist Identities,” 167.

League provides the women with “feminine” above-the-knee dresses as uniforms, rather than the more practical “male” uniform of pants and a shirt. But it is not only the clothing of the women that indicates appropriate femininity; in order to play, the women will also need to abide by certain rules, and be required to attend charm and beauty school, as introduced by League manager Ira Lowenstein:

IRA: There is no smoking. There is also no drinking and no men. All of your social engagements will be cleared through your team chaperones. Plus, each of you will have regular classes at charm and beauty school.

DORIS: For what?

IRA: Every girl in this league is going to be a lady.

Here, the women’s opportunity to play sport in the professional arena becomes conditional on their ability to conform to a “heteronormatively feminine ideal.”\(^{46}\) Importantly, however, given that postfeminism frames femininity, as Gill explains, “as a bodily property,” the ability of the players to conform to a “heteronormatively feminine ideal”\(^{47}\) requires only external and performative changes. It is here that the subversive possibilities of the makeover signalled by Gilligan\(^{48}\) become evident, as the “doing of appropriate femininity” by the players is perhaps a physical public performance to appease social commentators such as Maida, rather than an internal change of values or subjectivity. Indeed, while Ira declares that there will be “no smoking . . . no drinking and no men,” the players are later shown flouting these rules, thus emphasising how appropriate femininity, at least for these women, is a performance to be enacted only when required, and only to ensure their continued access to professional baseball.

Significantly, the makeover in A League of Their Own is a brief montage rather than a central organising narrative, and the scene contains important comedic elements. When, for example, the players are learning how to drink tea, the scene cuts to Doris sneakily dunking biscuits in her tea and eating them. When told by a scandalised Kit to “stop that,” Doris simply replies with “It’s good.” Doris is clearly

\(^{47}\) Lindner, “Blood, Sweat and Tears,” 244.
\(^{48}\) Gilligan, “Performing Postfeminist Identities,” 167.
attending charm school only because she has to; her gentle mockery of the process suggests that she is, as Gwynne has posited, performing “a temporary sacrifice . . . in order to secure more tangible, long-term rewards,”49 such as financial and personal independence. Importantly, Doris’ mockery of the process also makes explicit that such a gendered process is unnecessary; the makeovers performed within this film do not liberate “a true self” for any of the players, as the women remain exactly as they were prior to attending the class. The postfeminist notion that one’s true self can only be liberated through realisation of a commodified femininity50 is thus challenged by the liberal feminist sensibility which permeates A League of Their Own, in which questions of gender equality are prioritised over concerns about “appropriate” femininity.

While the physical deportment class is critiqued by a liberal feminist sensibility, the makeup class functions as an expression of postfeminism’s surveillance of the female body.51 Within this scene, the instructor walks along the line of women, telling her assistant the physical changes that each player needs in order to conform to an appropriate beauty ideal. Some require haircuts, others require work on their eyebrows. Dottie, the main protagonist, is of course flawless in both hair and makeup, as is her sister Kit. Marla Hooch (Megan Cavanagh), on the other hand, is apparently a lost cause, and thus a figure of ridicule, as the teacher suggests that the only thing that will make her more attractive is “more night games.” Marla is apparently so ugly that she could not possibly be fixed, and so “fails” the makeover. Appropriate femininity is thus a trait that must be taught and maintained and, perhaps more significantly, an ideal that not every woman is able to attain. Further, the unattainability of appropriate femininity is particularly raced and classed; as Pierman has scathingly noted,

[b]uried beneath the makeover of league players is a subtext about race, as well as about gender and social class. . . . League rules governing conduct, beauty, and femininity colluded against African-American players who would not have been considered beautiful or feminine by any white middle-class standard.52

50 Winch, “Your New Smart-Mouthed Girlfriends,” 361.
52 Pierman, “Baseball, Conduct, and True Womanhood,” 73.
The makeover paradigm can therefore be read as particularly exclusionary; while there may be elements of mockery and liberal feminist critique within *A League of Their Own*'s depiction of the makeover, it nevertheless works to reaffirm the notion that the ideal postfeminist (and indeed liberal) subject is white and middle-class.\(^5^3\)

*The Iron Lady* also relies on the makeover paradigm for a brief period within the film; however, Margaret’s makeover is initiated to make her *less* traditionally feminine. In order to achieve this, the makeover works to meld the feminine with the masculine; highlighting traits and qualities that indicate authority, while still maintaining an accepted level of femininity. This focus on Margaret’s need to assume more masculine traits is evidenced within a particular exchange in the film, between image consultant Gordon Reece (Roger Allam), Margaret and her colleague and Minister for Ireland, Airey Neave (Nicholas Farrell):

GORDAN: For a start, that hat has got to go. And the pearls. In fact I think all hats may have to go. You look and sound like a privileged Conservative wife and we’ve already got her vote. You’ve got lovely hair, but we need to do something with it to make it more –

AIREY: Important.

GORDAN: Yes. Give it more impact. But the main thing is your voice. It’s too high and it has no authority.

AIREY: “Methinks the lady doth screech too much.”

GORDAN: People don’t want to be harangued by a woman or hectored. Persuaded, yes. That “oh yes” at the end of the interview, that’s authoritative, that’s the voice of a leader.

MARGARET: Well, it’s all very well to talk about changing my voice, Mr Reece, but for some of my colleagues to imagine me as their leader, would be like imagining, I don’t know, being led into battle by their chambermaid. It’s my background and my sex. No matter how hard I’ve tried, and I have tried, to fit in, I know I will never be truly one of them.

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In this exchange, Margaret’s femininity is figured as problematic; her adherence to accepted markers of femininity – such as her hat and pearls – mark her as lacking authority and thus, for the male ministers, it is unimaginable that she could lead a government. Gordon makes it clear, however, that certain physical affectations can be altered to influence how the public read Margaret Thatcher’s body, and thus her amenability to govern. Gordon’s specific identification of her hair and her voice as requiring alteration reveals how the taking up of space is gendered. Margaret’s makeover, for example, ensures a new, voluminous hairdo that takes up more space than her previous ‘do; the volumising of her hair thus indicates her importance and power. Similarly, Margaret is also taught to take up more space vocally, through voice training to lower her voice and to project it. While the lowering of her pitch is depicted as significant for her altered public image, her ability to project this lowered pitch is equally significant in shoring up her new authority. Indeed, it is her projection that allows her to take up space without straining, as the previous accusation of her “screeching” might be understood. The taking up of space, both through her hair and her vocal strength, is thus central to Margaret’s gaining of authority, and indeed her makeover more broadly.

Margaret’s makeover is noteworthy for the way it simultaneously departs from, and upholds, the makeover paradigm. It upholds the postfeminist notion of the “true” self as being “liberated” through the makeover; given that the changes Margaret makes to her appearance and voice make her electable, and then elected, she realises the potential that she, Gordon and Airey believe she is capable of. Simultaneously, Margaret’s makeover also undermines the postfeminist makeover, as she is madeover to be more masculine, rather than more feminine. Furthermore, her ideal self is framed through the priorities of liberal feminism, specifically those of independence and women’s success in the public sphere, rather than postfeminist concerns. The deployment of the makeover paradigm in The Iron Lady and A League of Their Own thus brings attention to the ways a liberal feminist sensibility is both referenced and circumscribed by postfeminist rhetoric.

The Flashback Structure

Each of the three films explored within this chapter is structured through the filmic device of the flashback. That the flashback is used across all three films is
significant, as it suggests that the films are positioning the audience to read not only the films, but feminism and women’s history more broadly, in certain ways. Indeed, the use of the flashback in film is always strategic, sometimes working to build anticipation, as in the case of *Amelia*, or to complicate the audience’s understanding of a historical figure, such as in *The Iron Lady*. There is also a gendered element to the use of the flashback; in her discussion of the woman’s film in Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s, Jeanine Basinger has argued that

[t]he flashback is a perfect cinematic form for a story about a woman, being in and of itself a rigid, entrapping format that says clearly that there are no choices but the one already made.  

While the flashback may indicate a foreboding within the woman’s film of Basinger’s study, the flashback is more celebratory within the postfeminist historical women’s film, as the films broadly depict their feminist protagonists positively, and thus restore these protagonists to their “rightful” place within mainstream women’s history. Indeed, within films like *A League of Their Own* and *Amelia*, the flashback arguably gestures to a tradition of feminist action that is perhaps popularly understood to no longer exist because it is no longer needed. Furthermore, as Maureen Turim has argued, “[f]lashbacks in film often merge the two levels of remembering the past, giving large scale social and political history the subjective mode of a single, fictional individual’s remembered experience.” This focus on the individual’s remembered experience is particularly significant given that these films draw on liberal feminist rhetoric; the flashback-style structure thus arguably contributes to the postfeminist rendering of feminist history as the domain of independent and empowered individuals, rather than as a movement of collective action. Thus, in the case of these three films, the flashback arguably works not only to structure the films’ narrative, but also encourages a nostalgic and postfeminist reading of feminist history more broadly.

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The pairing of the celebratory narrative and the flashback structure within these three films also arguably facilitates multiple readings of these episodes’ position in feminist history; these readings are best understood through Clare Hemmings’ articulation of the “political grammar” of “progress, loss and return”\(^{57}\) narratives. While Hemmings’ work explores progress, loss and return narratives in the context of competing histories of feminist theories, her ideas also translate particularly well to my analysis of how feminist histories are depicted within postfeminist historical women’s films. The progress narrative, as Hemmings explains it, is clearly a positive account, one told with excitement and even relish. It is a narrative of success and accomplishment and positions feminist theory, and its subjects, as attentive and dynamic. It is a narrative with clear chronology: we are taken from the past via key shifts in politics, theory and feminism’s subject, and towards a complex feminist present. . . . The shifts are complete; the past is over.\(^ {58}\)

The past is thus constructed as a necessary stepping stone on the way to an enlightened present; within such a reading, these films work to indicate “how far we’ve come.” According to such a reading of these films and their protagonists, Amelia, Dottie and Margaret made inroads for equality that were significant for their respective times, which have since been expanded to become “full” equality for women. These narratives thus contribute to an understanding of feminist history as progressive, wherein the actions of such ground-breaking women have ensured that women in the contemporary audience have far greater equality than the conditions faced by the protagonists.

In contrast, the films may instead be read as loss narratives, in which the present has to be evacuated of feminist political value (otherwise why the lament?), the past has to be that which has been lost, but also and importantly, a good object worthy of being recovered (otherwise its loss might not be lament-worthy).\(^ {59}\)

In other words, loss narratives construct the past as desirable in comparison with the present; the feminist subject of the past is considered superior to the “pretender”\(^{60}\) of


the present. Within such a reading, *A League of Their Own*, *Amelia*, and *The Iron Lady* are understood as “evidence” that the feminist movement, or feminist figures, were somehow more vibrant, more dynamic, simply more, than the feminist movement that continues in contemporary Western society. The flashback thus works to compare a superior past to a comparatively inferior present; this is particularly evident within *The Iron Lady*, as Margaret’s flashbacks are depicted in vivid colours, while her present life is presented in dark hues.61 This indication of the superiority of the past is also evident within *A League of Their Own* when, at the beginning of the film, an older Dottie is being encouraged by her daughter, Margaret, to attend the All-American Girls’ Baseball League reunion, who says, “Mom, when are you gonna realise how special it was? How much it all meant?” The way Margaret speaks about the League in the past tense indicates to the audience that the “special” moment that she is referencing (we have not yet discovered that Dottie is going to a professional baseball League’s reunion) is a significant historical moment, but one that is no longer.

However, while these films may be read as evidence of a loss narrative, they may also be read as indicating a “return” narrative. The return narrative, according to Hemmings, “propose[s] that we advance through a recuperation of what remains valuable.”62 In other words, through depicting the vibrancy of this liberal feminist past, the films are arguably working to revitalise the feminist movement in the present, by demonstrating to the audience that there are positive elements associated with feminist thought. Indeed, by depicting the strength and success of these liberal feminist protagonists, the films are arguably repositioning liberal feminist ideals, such as breaking new ground in the public sphere, as desirable and admirable for their female viewers. The flashbacks deployed within these three films thus facilitate competing and contradictory readings of the film, each depending on the priorities and subject position of the viewer.

**The Rehabilitation of Margaret Thatcher**

While the flashback structure of a postfeminist historical women’s film generally lends itself to multiple readings, flashbacks can also be used strategically in an attempt

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to encourage the audience to adopt a particular perspective. This is most obvious within Lloyd’s *The Iron Lady*, a film that deploys the flashback structure as a strategy for rehabilitating Margaret Thatcher’s image. One brief, but particularly telling moment within *The Iron Lady* that indicates the film’s rehabilitative intentions comes after elderly Margaret has visited her doctor, and is struggling with her hallucinations of Denis. In order to drown him out, Margaret turns on all the appliances she can, and then catches sight of her own visit to the doctor on television. The news anchor says the following over the footage of a frail Margaret leaving the clinic:

ANCHOR: Baroness Thatcher made an apparently routine visit to her doctor today. Although rarely seen in public, Britain’s longest serving Prime Minister of the twentieth century remains a controversial figure. Almost lovingly dubbed by the Soviets ‘The Iron Lady’, she’s credited, with her friend Ronald Reagan, with a decisive role in the ending of the Cold War. Her supporters claim that she transformed the British economy and reversed the country’s post-war decline. Her detractors blame her savage public spending cuts and sweeping privatisation of –

The anchor’s explanation is then cut off, as the noise coming from the apartment has summoned Margaret’s carer June (Susan Brown), who abruptly turns off the television. The fact that she turns the television off after the positive remembrance of Margaret’s reign, but just before Margaret’s “sins” are laid out – sins that many have found difficult to forgive, as evidenced by the singing and dancing in the streets upon Thatcher’s death in 2013 – indicates that the film is subtly positioning the audience to consider Margaret’s reign in positive terms, rather than negative.

The filmmakers’ decision to frame the narrative by depicting the (at the time still-living) Margaret Thatcher as an elderly woman struggling with dementia also indicates an attempt to temper popular hatred towards her; popular notions of Margaret as “The Iron Lady” are certainly complicated by comparisons between her “then” and “now.” Indeed, as Sadie Wearing has insightfully posited, “[t]he flashback structure stresses differences in the body over time making these absolutely stark and

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effectively distinct subjectivities.” In other words, the fact that each flashback is bookended by a return to a confused, little, old lady makes it difficult to consider Prime Minister Thatcher and elderly Thatcher as one and the same, and indeed, as the movie progressed, I found myself wondering at the reliability of the narration. The constant oscillation between the past and the contemporary moment, and the fact that it was the “present” Margaret Thatcher that was doing the remembering, made me wonder if she was being depicted as an unreliable narrator, fictionalising her past. This concern was also voiced by feminist reviewer Laurie Penny:

To my left, my anarcha-feminist friend has started scribbling frantically in a notebook. “I’ve worked out how we can get through this,” she says. “It’s not a panegyric, it’s actually a really clever plot with an unreliable narrator, about a dotty old lady editing out all the bad bits of her past and remembering herself as a hero.”

While such a comment may be a tongue-in-cheek joke by the reviewer, there is certainly merit to its sentiment, and it draws attention to the way the flashback functions strategically within this film to complicate and rehabilitate the polarising history of Margaret Thatcher. This rehabilitation of Margaret Thatcher within The Iron Lady thus indicates how a liberal feminist focus on women’s access to the public sphere can intersect with postfeminist progress narratives, and how this intersection broadly influences the remembrance of women’s histories in ways that shore up postfeminist rhetoric, particularly the view that gender equality is a “thing of the past.”

Retro-sexism

The deployment of the flashback structure within each of these films also facilitates the profusion of retro-sexism, given the very clear separation between “then” and “now” within each film. Imelda Whelehan explains retro-sexism as nostalgia for a lost, uncomplicated past peopled by ‘real’ women and humorous cheeky chappies, where the battle of the sexes is fondly remembered as being played out as if in a situation comedy. . . . Such retrospective envisioning offers a dialogue between the past and the

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present and is symptomatic of a real fear about a future where male hegemony might be more comprehensively and effectively attacked than has so far been the case.\textsuperscript{66}

In other words, retro-sexism makes possible the expression of sexism through popular culture, protected as it is by its historicised setting. Indeed, as Maria Margo and Mark Douglas have argued,

the historical milieu of these productions provides an alibi for the industry that produces them; a director can always argue that she is not providing a forum for regressive politics, rather, ‘that’s just the way it was back then.’\textsuperscript{67}

The postfeminist historical women’s film is thus a particularly rich source of retro-sexism, given that it is a form of media focused on female protagonists set in a historicised past. The presence of retro-sexism arguably functions to position the audience to empathise with the female protagonist, while also, as Gill has persuasively argued, “constructing scenarios that would garner criticism if they were represented as contemporary.”\textsuperscript{68} Much like the way that the flashback structure of the films is used to direct the audience’s attention to the “pastness” of the protagonists’ experiences, so too does the use of retro-sexism work to encourage a comparison between an unenlightened and sexist “then,” and a supposedly enlightened “now” which is able to laugh at the past. Indeed, Gill argues in her later work that “the potency of sexism lies in its very unspeakability”\textsuperscript{69}; in other words, within a postfeminist cultural context, sexism becomes visible only through its relationship to history, and thus becomes an invisible, or “unspeakable,” contemporary experience.

The postfeminist historical women’s film is a particularly fruitful source of retro-sexism, and the character of Jimmy Dugan within \textit{A League of Their Own} arguably fulfils this role of historicising sexism in significant ways. Firstly, Jimmy provides the evidence of a sexist past that has allegedly been surpassed by the new, empowered

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{66} Whelehan, \textit{Overloaded}, 11.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Maria F. Magro and Mark Douglas, “Reflections on Sex, Shakespeare and Nostalgia in Trevor Nunn’s Twelfth Night,” in \textit{Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction}, eds. Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 44. See also: Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 160.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 160.
\end{itemize}
postfeminist society. He uses crude, crass, sexist language in order to both belittle his players to their faces, and express his disdain for them behind their backs. His behaviour epitomises Nina K. Martin’s assertion that with postfeminist contexts “rampant sexism . . . is so wedged into the past that sexist representations are merely amusing, since they are so far away from our present experiences.” In other words, Jimmy is so excessively sexist that it becomes absurd and thus perhaps enjoyable for the viewer as we might laugh at him rather than with him. Indeed, throughout the film, Jimmy has several lines that are memorable for all the wrong reasons. After the first game, when a drunken Jimmy has done nothing except sit, hungover in the dugout, the League’s manager Ira chastises his lack of guidance of his ballplayers, to which Jimmy responds, “[b]allplayers?! I haven’t got ballplayers, I’ve got girls. Girls are what you sleep with after the game, not what you coach during the game.” This is a particularly misogynistic statement, and articulates the “hypermasculine, machismo or aggressive maleness” identified by Rob Cover as emerging from elite male sports teams. Indeed, not only does Jimmy flatly deny the fact that women can and do play baseball, but he completely objectifies them. Women are “what” you sleep with, not “who” you sleep with. From this early statement, then, Jimmy is thus figured as a sexist par excellence.

Later in the film, Jimmy’s sexism is again foregrounded when he yells at Evelyn for making a poor decision in the field. His incessant berating makes Evelyn cry, thus providing the context for one of the film’s most notorious lines: “Are you crying? Are you crying?! There’s no crying! There’s no crying in baseball!” Here, Jimmy’s incredulity paints the women of his team as unable to physically, emotionally and intellectually deal with the rigours of baseball. As such, he arguably acts as the spectre of sexism haunting the text; however, given that this is a comedy, his sexism undermines his credibility and is not taken seriously either by the players, or within the film more broadly. Indeed, over the course of the film, Jimmy becomes more humanised and gains respect for Dottie and her skills, even if this respect is not given to the rest of the team. Yet, this relationship between Jimmy and Dottie can also be seen as justifying his

continuing derision for the rest of the team, for if the exceptionally skilled Dottie can earn his respect through her talent and work ethic, his contempt for the rest of the women as “girls,” rather than “ballplayers” arguably gains legitimacy. While such a perspective is undermined by the end of the film, when Jimmy decides to continue coaching the team for the following season (even without Dottie), the possibility of reading their relationship according to Dottie’s “earning” of his respect indicates the conservatism inherent to retro-sexism. Indeed, Whelehan cautions against a simple dismissal of the comedic potential of such retro-sexism, when she warns,

though we might all enjoy individual images or visual examples of ‘political incorrectness’, it is hard not to be aware that, in their totality, such images, utterances and perspectives show evidence of a renewed attack on contemporary female experiences. 73

In contrast to the humorous take on retro-sexism in A League of Their Own, the retro-sexism deployed within The Iron Lady is not comedic, and is thus perhaps more indicative of the “renewed attack on contemporary female experiences”74 of which Whelehan warns. One of the most damning examples occurs prior to Margaret’s assumption of the Conservative Party leadership when, while Margaret is the Education Minister in the Heath Government, the Shadow Minister for Education uses gendered language in order to dismiss both Margaret and her arguments:

SHADOW MINISTER: Methinks the Right Honourable lady doth screech too much. And, and, if she wants us to take her seriously, she must learn to calm down!

MARGARET: If the Right Honourable gentleman could perhaps attend more closely to WHAT I am saying, rather than how I am saying it, he may receive a valuable education in spite of himself!

Here, the combination of “screech” and “calm down” are used to invoke the traditional image of the female hysterical, as well as drawing from traditional binary norms wherein women are aligned with uncontrolled emotion (hence the need for Margaret to “calm down”) and the untamed natural world (hence the accusation of “screeching”).

Significantly, I could not find any evidence of this exchange having occurred within the biography upon which this film was based; it thus appears that it was added to position

73 Whelehan, Overloaded, 8.
74 Whelehan, Overloaded, 8.
the audience to empathise with Margaret.\textsuperscript{75} Despite the fact that Margaret Thatcher was renowned for her acerbic wit, this exchange is clearly set up to demonstrate gender prejudice that Margaret Thatcher faced; a strategy which is deployed in tandem with the film’s flashback structure as an attempt to construct her as sympathetic for a contemporary audience accustomed to a rhetoric of equal rights.

Such comments thus also work on a more foundational level, to support a reading of the viewer, as well as contemporary postfeminist society, as “better than” the depicted sexists and the historicised societies in which the comments are depicted as having been made. Kaplan has argued that

\[\text{[p]ut simply, liberal democracy would be that which renders obsolete the various forms of disempowering inequality. As such, it absolutely requires the evidence of this obsolescence, which assumes spectral form: they must be defunct yet remain threatening.}\textsuperscript{76}

In other words, the obvious and accepted sexism that pervades the texts is necessary to somehow “prove” that the characters with these sexist perspective are, as Kaplan has argued, “behind the times,” and that “‘we’ [the audience] have long since assimilated the lessons of feminism.”\textsuperscript{77} The logic of liberal feminism within a postfeminist text thus arguably requires this retro-sexism in order to justify both the presence of the liberal feminism within the film, as well as the presumed redundancy\textsuperscript{78} of liberal feminism within contemporary society.

**Conclusion**

The films *A League of Their Own*, *Amelia* and *The Iron Lady* are all recognisably liberal feminist films, marked particularly through their engagement with questions of women’s independence. While my analysis of *A League of Their Own* drew attention to the ways that Kit’s empowerment departs from the typical independence narrative epitomised by *The Iron Lady*, this empowerment narrative is a subplot within a film that repeatedly draws on liberal feminist approaches to women’s independence through the development of other characters. Importantly, there is a celebratory

\textsuperscript{75} See: McFarlane, “Fragments From an Adamant Life,” 32.
\textsuperscript{76} Kaplan, “Rebel Citizenship and the Cunning of the Liberal Imaginary in *Thelma & Louise*,” 14.
\textsuperscript{77} Kaplan, “Rebel Citizenship and the Cunning of the Liberal Imaginary in *Thelma & Louise*,” 9-10.
aesthetic to the films that valorises this independence, suggestive of a collective desire to “return” to a golden era of independent women, when breaking into the public sphere was figured as the ultimate goal for feminism, and such a goal was uncomplicated by considerations of which women had the resources to be able to do so in a meaningful way.

At the same time, these depictions of independence are far from simplistic, and draw attention to the ways that assertions of women’s independence are always implicated within gendered paradigms. It is significant that the film with the most precarious depiction of independence is *Amelia*, a film that was released in 2009, in the midst of the global financial crisis of 2008-2009. This diegetic depiction of women’s independence as “excessive” in this film is perhaps in some ways a response to the economic and social uncertainties resulting from the financial crisis, given that notions of emphatic individualism and independence were at least briefly shaken in this period. The significance of the global financial crisis for the depiction of feminist heroines within postfeminist historical women’s films forms the basis of the following chapter, in which I explore how the politics of speech is implicated within Joe Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) and Cary Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre* (2011).

Importantly, the films’ deployment of the makeover paradigm and flashback structure indicate the ways that liberal feminism interacts with and challenges the priorities of postfeminism. *A League of Their Own*, for example, deploys a liberal feminist approach to the makeover paradigm, critiquing both the sexism of the period depicted, as well as marking the differences between a “then” that required feminist intervention, and a “now” in which attendance at charm school would supposedly not be necessary. In contrast, *The Iron Lady* relies on more postfeminist notions of the makeover paradigm as liberating a “true” self; however, this “true” self is made meaningful through priorities often attributed to liberal feminism, most notably women’s success in the public sphere. *Amelia*, however, offers a more critical approach to the position of women in the public sphere, noting how the liberal feminist priority of women’s independence can be circumscribed or curtailed by the postfeminist accusation of excessiveness and “media-whoredom.”

Across the three films, then, the approaches to liberal feminist narratives are complicated by contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal concerns and priorities. While these postfeminist discourses at times undermine the films’ liberal feminist
qualities, they are unable to extinguish the fire of liberal feminism that underpins each film. Indeed, each film openly celebrates women in the public sphere, and so cannot be completely recuperated by the depoliticising influences of postfeminism. In other words, while, and perhaps because, each film manifests the tensions between liberal feminism and postfeminism, the films contribute to wider conversations about the place of feminism in contemporary western society.
Chapter Two: Speech, Silence and Recession Culture in *Pride & Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*

“The way back to reality is to destroy our perceptions of it,” said Bergson. Yes, but these deceptive perceptions were/are implanted through language – the all-pervasive language of myth, conveyed overtly and subliminally through religion, “great art,” literature, the dogmas of professionalism, the media, grammar. Indeed, deception is embedded in the very texture of the words we use, and here is where our exorcism can begin.¹

- Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*

Mary Daly, in her 1979 book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, makes explicitly clear the key feminist argument that language is a tool through which patriarchal perceptions of reality are established as the norm. As the above quote testifies, language communicates far more than simply the meaning of individual words; rather, it is tied up with the maintenance of the broader, often gendered, priorities of social institutions. Given that men have traditionally been the producers of and gatekeepers to “religion, ‘great art,’ literature, the dogmas of professionalism, the media, grammar,”² many feminist theorists have argued that gendered language is a fundamental framework through which these social and institutional priorities are organised.³ In other words, patriarchal language and its use is one of the pivotal ways in which women’s oppression is codified, and thus must be a primary arena in which the fight for social equality takes place.

² Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 3.
Importantly, Daly deploys emotive and provocative language in order to make explicit these connections. Calling the language of religion, professionalism and media “deceptive,” and the critical interrogation of such language an “exorcism,” for example, is a deliberate strategy to draw attention to the insidious malignancy of patriarchal language, and to make clear that while “language is a part of patriarchy,” the evil in its exclusivity can be challenged, and ultimately changed. Such a critique of language and its use has held a central role in feminist cultural interventions into patriarchal society, particularly during, and since, the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. According to the logic of feminist theorists such as Daly, reworking language to be more inclusive or representative of women’s experiences is an important step in liberating women from their subordinated position within a patriarchal society for, as Dale Spender has argued, “[t]o be inferior when it comes to language is frequently to be discounted.”

It is noteworthy, however, that Daly’s argument does not canvas how women’s silence can complicate this approach, and what it means when the “deceptive” language of patriarchal social structures is refused in favour of silence. Silence remains a particularly contentious strategy of female dissent within feminist approaches to language, given that women’s silence has traditionally been engineered and maintained by patriarchal institutions in which women’s voices were systematically denied, and thus made inaudible. Despite this fraught history, however, silence is increasingly being explored by feminist theorists as an equally valid response to women’s oppression. In other words, women’s speech and silence practices are equally significant communicative strategies that can make explicit the gendered norms that structure a particular society.

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4 Cameron, Feminism and Linguistic Theory, 3.
5 Spender, Man Made Language, 65. See also: Irigaray, Thinking the Difference For A Peaceful Revolution, xv.
The following chapter will critically examine the way that the politics of speech and silence function within two film adaptations of classic feminist texts that feature outspoken protagonists: Joe Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) and Cary Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre* (2011). Like all adaptations, these films are interpretations of a source text refracted through the prevailing concerns of the cultural context in which they were produced; as Lynette Frey has argued, adaptations of “classic” and historical texts do not simply point to, and replicate, a previous narrative moment, but in fact have just as much to say about their contemporary settings.7 Speech and silence function as particularly useful analytic frameworks for analysing these films’ relationship to feminism, as not only do both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* hold a central position within the feminist canon due to their protagonists’ unapologetic outspokenness, but the politics of speech deployed within these adaptations concomitantly works to shore up postfeminist concerns of personal empowerment and individualism. As the films were produced in a period of increasing economic, and thus social, disparities, their deployment of speech and silence also arguably acts as a flashpoint around which economic and social anxieties manifest, and thus become meaningful.

**Feminist Approaches to Speech**

Exploring the politics of speech and silence as evidence of wider social relations has a long history within feminist thought. The initial aim of feminist approaches to language sought to expose the ways that language itself could be considered oppressive, as it was unable to fully express women’s place in the world. Indeed, Deborah Cameron has argued that in the context of consciousness-raising groups, “[w]omen struggling to reinterpret their experience have noticed again and again that language itself does not guarantee communication, and many feel actually inhibited by

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the inadequacy of words.” This idea continues to hold cultural currency, especially within postfeminist historical women’s films. Indeed, the notion of speech and language as “by men and for men” is briefly canvased within Thomas Vinterberg’s 2015 film adaptation of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, when protagonist Bathsheba Everdene (Carey Mulligan) responds to potential suitor Mr Boldwood’s (William Sheen) insistence that Bathsheba defines whether she “likes or respects him – which one is it?” with “[i]t is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs.” While drawn verbatim from Hardy’s novel, the inclusion of this line of dialogue within the film is important, as it firmly locates the film within a tradition of feminist thought that approaches language as one of the central arenas in which women’s oppression is established and maintained.

The predominant response amongst feminists to the “problem” of women’s access to language has centred on the “reclamation” of language, of actively speaking up and talking back. This approach simultaneously drew on and evoked both a liberal feminist perspective that equated access to speech and language with “individual autonomy” and personal independence, and a radical feminist approach that equated the dismantling of patriarchal language with the overthrow of patriarchal societies more broadly. That the reclamation of language straddles both reformist and revolutionary approaches to feminist theories indicates, as Cameron has compellingly argued, that “the use of language is at the heart of feminist political

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11 This filmic moment is also significant for the way it draws the attention of the audience to the politics of speech and silence, despite the fact that speech and silence are not referenced in any meaningful way within the film again. In this way, a recognisably feminist “politics of speech” acts as a feminist trope within this film, a cinematic device that is explored in greater depth in Chapter Four.
14 See, for example: Carrillo Rowe and Malhotra, “Still the Silence,” 1; Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, 5; Tolmach Lakoff, *Talking Power*, 198.
This particular approach to speech and language resulted in a range of passionate and playful texts, such as Mary Daly’s triad, *Beyond God the Father*, *Gyn/Ecology* and *Pure Lust*, or work by French feminists, such as Hélène Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” and Luce Irigaray’s “When Our Lips Speak Together.” Daly’s work seeks to reclaim language by reconstructing individual words to better articulate the female experience; in *Gyn/Ecology*, for example, the traditionally negative connotations of the word “spinster” are rewritten as “Spinsters,” who are women that “spin and weave, mending and creating unity of consciousness.” Similarly, Cixous’ work speaks of a female language – écriture féminine – that is accessible to women through writing. These texts each exhorted women to not “fear the language of men, [for] we mustn’t leave them a single place that’s any more theirs alone than we are.” Drawing on the notion that access to the contested domain of speech and language is empowering, such theorists opened up the possibilities of speaking and writing language as freeing and joyous, rather than exclusionary and stagnant. Such texts are written as a joyful call to arms, a reclamation of language that is ripe with gynocentric potential.

Within the current socio-economic context, however, approaching speech and language-use as evidence of an individual’s personal empowerment is no longer simply identifiable as a feminist position; rather, it simultaneously aligns closely with a neoliberal and postfeminist politics of speech. Neoliberalism, according to Rosalind Gill,

> is understood increasingly as constructing individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating. The individual must bear full responsibility for their life biography, no matter how severe the constraints upon their action.

Neoliberalism also contains a strain of emphatic individualism that, as Chilla Bulbeck argues, “imagines a society of more or less equal opportunity, a conception of the

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16 Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, 5.
17 Daly, *Beyond God the Father*; Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*; Daly, *Pure Lust*.
20 Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 386.
world which denies deep-seated divisions between groups of people.”

This valorisation of personal responsibility has important ramifications for the politics of speech within a neoliberal and postfeminist cultural milieu, as neoliberalism and postfeminism’s dominant discourses work to strip any notion of the social or institutional from individuals’ experiences, while simultaneously praising the act of speaking as evidence of personal empowerment. Indeed, the prevalence of talk shows, personal blogging and confessional memoirs in contemporary western popular culture makes clear that speaking up about personal experiences is an important way to establish one’s personal autonomy or empowerment within the public sphere. Yet unlike feminist work on language, this form of empowerment is often focussed aggressively on the individual rather than the social, and is thus divorced of the broader political critiques and pressure for social change that are central to feminist theories. Indeed, within such a cultural context, popular “feminist” narratives lack the broader social critique espoused by theorists like Daly, Cixous and Tannen, instead assuming that the presence of speech is indicative of individual agency, and reaffirming the simplistic relationship between speech and empowerment, and silence and passivity.

Simultaneously, however, there are also discursive constraints on the depiction of speech as empowerment. As Angela McRobbie has compellingly noted, “[t]he new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern, sophisticated girl.” In other words, speech is indicative of personal empowerment only if an individual uses speech to affirm a sense of personal empowerment. Conversely, speaking up about continuing inequalities is, as McRobbie has argued, “to run the risk of ridicule.”

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the labelling of the ridiculed as a “victim”\(^{27}\) which, within a cultural context that valorises self-sufficiency and an emphatic individualism, is a significant ideological slight. Thus, even when situated within a cultural context that allegedly valorises personal empowerment, speech practices continue to be implicated within larger power structures and socially policed norms.

In order to posit speech and the reclamation of language as a path to liberation, however, the notion that silence indicates oppression or disenfranchisement has circulated in both feminist and postfeminist contexts. Indeed, scores of theorists initially identified “silence [as] a symbol of oppression”\(^{28}\); Cixous, for example, rejected “the snare of silence,”\(^{29}\) while Betty McLellan has argued that “[i]n a world where speech is reserved for the economically and politically powerful, anyone who would question, or disagree with, or criticise the dominant voice is silenced by exclusion.”\(^{30}\) In other words, to be silent is not only to lack the power to express oneself, or be self-determining, or control one’s own life, but also to be denied one’s place in the public sphere, and thus be unable to contribute to the change of wider social institutions.

Feminist theory, however, has also complicated this understanding of speech and silence by recognising that reclaiming women’s voices is not as simple as equating silence with oppression or, as Mary Dalton and Kirsten Fatzinger note, “linking voice with action and silence with passivity.”\(^{31}\) Carla Kaplan, for example, has argued that the simple presence of speech cannot be considered inherently empowering, due to the “myriad ways – even between women – that communication may fail.”\(^{32}\) This is a particularly salient point in terms of the communication and/or relationships between white feminists and feminists of colour. The complex relationships between white feminists and feminists of colour indicates that the integration of feminist voices into critical conversations about gendered oppression – conversations predominantly held in English – can ultimately work to maintain, and even strengthen, the marginalisation of others. In this case, language is not empowering, but continues to be exclusionary;

\(^{27}\) Alyson M. Cole, “‘There Are No Victims in This Class’: On Female Suffering and Anti-‘Victim Feminism,’” *NWSA Journal* 11, no. 1 (1999): 72-73.


\(^{29}\) Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 881.

\(^{30}\) McLellan, *Unspeakable*, 17.

\(^{31}\) Dalton and Fatzinger, “Choosing Silence,” 34.

for example, the mainstreaming or legitimisation of certain white feminist voices as experts about all issues of inequality, and the concomitant devaluing or exclusion of minority voices, can be read as a hegemonic absorption of the threat that was originally posed by women speaking up outside of mainstream channels.33 Indeed, there is a relationship between speech and patriarchy that cannot be undermined by the act of “reclaiming”; as Cameron has compellingly argued, “[o]ne cannot speak ‘outside the structure’, either of language or society.”34 In other words, while the reclamation of certain words, and even certain languages, is certainly a positive intervention into patriarchal practices, such reclaiming remains responsive to patriarchy, and can perhaps never be as revolutionary as initially theorised. Furthermore, while the relationship between speech, access to language and autonomy is key to feminist approaches to language, this equation is complicated by hate speech, a type of speech that attempts “to silence the addressee,”35 who is often disadvantaged or marginalised in comparison to the speaker.36 Thus despite feminist interventions, speech and language-use continue to be implicated within complex axes of social and institutional power, and analysis of their deployment must be considered through a framework that addresses these social norms.

Feminist Approaches to Silence

Just as the presence of speech cannot always be assumed to indicate empowerment, nor can silence always be understood as proof of oppression. As noted linguist Deborah Tannen has argued, “the ‘true’ intention or motive of any utterance cannot be determined from examination of linguistic form alone,”37 and so context is key to the exploration of power and domination within speech and language-usage.

For example, while silence is, of course, often enforced upon the marginalised and disadvantaged within a particular society, performing silence can be so much more than “censoring yourself for fear of being ridiculed, attacked or ignored.” Instead “taciturnity,” as Tannen and others have argued, “can itself be an instrument of power,” particularly for certain expressions of masculinity that rely on silence for their performance of “male power, rendering men emotionally distant or unavailable.” Indeed, much feminist scholarship works to disprove and complicate the relationship between silence and passivity, reconsidering silence as an expansive, rather than limiting, communicative possibility. Such possibilities were canvassed both within, and in response to, Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (1993), a film underpinned by this approach to silence. Through Ada’s elective mutism, Campion was able to, as Richard Allen notes,

explor[e] a question that has preoccupied much feminist thought for the last twenty years: the capacity of women to articulate their desire within a culture where they are denied mastery of discourse.

If Ada’s silence indicates, as Neil Robinson has suggested, “a suspicion of patriarchy’s language and emotional repressions,” then silence can be read, at least in this film, as a rejection of norms that require women to speak in a language that cannot fully express their needs.

Such an approach to speech and silence thus figures silence as, according to Margaret Montoya, “one of the choices available to us in our repertoire of communicative devices.” By refiguring silence as a communicative choice or option, such scholarship unpacks the relationship between silence and passivity, exploring where and how silence actually functions as indicative of power. Importantly,

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38 Cameron, “Introduction,” 3.
43 Montoya, “Silence and Silencing,” 274.
however, such an approach does not paint all silence as powerful or “mutinous,” 44 but rather explores the conditions under which both speech and silence can be powerful, partial, subversive, or evidence of oppression. Indeed, Felicity Coombs has noted that Ada’s silence, and her challenge of the patriarchal order, can only be partial, as her use of the piano to communicate

provided [Ada] with an alternative mode of representation for emotional expression though at the same time, she imprisons her power of autonomy in an object of the culture she rejects.45

The interrelationships between speech and silence, power and passivity, are thus complex, and cannot be divorced from the cultural context in which speech or silence is occurring.

In some ways, then, it is the access one has to a variety of communicative strategies in a particular context that imbues a particular speech act with either power or subversiveness. If one wishes to be silent, but is compelled to speak, speech might be considered evidence of oppression in that particular situation. Similarly, although women can reclaim language for personal empowerment, the decision to be silent can also be remarkably freeing. Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Sheena Malhotra have argued, for example, that “silence allows us the space to breathe. It allows us the freedom of not having to exist constantly in reaction to what is said.” 46 Here, then, silence is depicted as a freedom from speech, rather than a deprivation of speech. This notion of silence as a freedom, rather than a deprivation, is also evident in Deaf and Deaf-allied communities. Within such communities, as Rachel Levitt has articulated, silence can be a technique, a cloak, at times a space of invisibility and solidarity . . . More profoundly, silence is a refusal to occupy the hegemonic space of speaking for and over those subjects that hearing norms render unintelligible.47


45 Felicity Coombs, “In the Body of The Piano,” in Piano Lesson: Approaches to The Piano, eds. Felicity Coombs and Suzanne Gemmell (Sydney: John Libbey & Company Pty Ltd, 1999), 91.


In other words, silence is a political tool to be wielded against an ableist society. The strategic deployment of silence by Deaf communities thus indicates that there is a significant difference between being silent and being silenced, as remaining silent in the face of a compulsion to speak is vastly different than trying to speak and being systematically ignored, excluded or silenced. According to feminist approaches to the politics of speech and silence, then, the context of communication is the most important indicator of whether or not speech or silence can work to empower either the individual or the marginalised group. Despite these complex approaches to speech and silence, however, it is the notion that speech equals agency, while silence indicates personal restriction, which is most visible within the postfeminist historical women’s film, particularly within Joe Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) and Cary Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre* (2011).

*Pride & Prejudice*

Jane Austen holds an ambivalent position within feminist literary criticism. She is viewed as a socially conservative author, while her work is also located within an Enlightenment feminist tradition. Margaret Kirkham, for example, has written that Austen’s subject-matter is the central subject-matter of rational, or Enlightenment, feminism, and... her viewpoint on the moral nature and status of women, female education, marriage, authority and the family, and the representation of women in literature is strikingly similar to that shown by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. According to this perspective, Austen’s focus on domestic concerns and resolution of her narratives with the marriages of her protagonists does not undermine her position in the feminist canon; rather, her adherence to the expected plot-lines of the time

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allowed her to offer critiques of the institutions of marriage and patriarchal power that would perhaps not have reached an audience otherwise.

Accordingly, *Pride and Prejudice*,

50 perhaps the most well-known of Austen’s novels, is oft-praised for its use of female-centric dialogue, particularly that of its protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet. Patricia Howell Michaelson has noted that “[i]n *Pride and Prejudice* the liveliest speakers are women; the men are comparatively mute”

51; speech and language are thus central to this text. Given that this novel “is about Elizabeth Bennet,”

52 it is thus unsurprising that her use of speech and language commands scholarly attention. Indeed, Elizabeth’s outspokenness is repeatedly referenced by scholars; Marea Mitchell and Dianne Osland, for example, note Elizabeth’s “fluent tongue and acerbic wit,”

53 while Juliette Wells has argued, [o]ne of Elizabeth Bennet’s most appealing qualities, to twenty-first-century readers, is her outspokenness. Accustomed to thinking of candor as powerful and admirable, we applaud Elizabeth’s willingness to stand up to Lady Catherine de Bourgh, to counter Darcy’s rude statements, and to ridicule Mr. Collins’s cant.

54 Importantly for the politics of the novel, Elizabeth’s outspokenness never crosses the line into rudeness; her desirability as a heroine is at least partially due to the way her “wit and outspokenness stay just within the bounds of civility,”

55 and thus allow her to remain within, and thus reap the rewards of, polite society, such as her acquaintance with, and then marriage to, Mr Darcy.

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50 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin Group, 2008 [1813]).


Given the politics of speech that circulate within *Pride and Prejudice* as well as the current trend towards adaptations of classic feminist texts, it is perhaps unsurprising that the novel has been adapted for a contemporary postfeminist audience. Released in 2005, Joe Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice* features Keira Knightley as the irrepressible Lizzie Bennet and Matthew Macfadyen as the aloof, yet socially awkward, Fitzwilliam Darcy. Significantly, the film title’s ampersand indicates, as Dunja Mohr and Anja Muller-Wood argue, “that this is not a faithful adaptation of the source text”; in other words, this slight reworking of the title signals the adaptation’s departure from the source text in subtle but important ways. This departure is further emphasised through the shortening of Elizabeth’s name within the adaptation to “Lizzie,” rather than “Elizabeth” or “Eliza,” thus making clear that Wright is offering us an “updated” version of the famous protagonist.

Based on Jane Austen’s canonical novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), the film follows Lizzie Bennet, the second eldest of five sisters, as their lives are turned upside down by the arrival of the wealthy Charles Bingley (Simon Woods), his sister Caroline Bingley (Kelly Reilly) and his wealthier friend, Mr Darcy, to Netherfield Hall. While Bingley and Lizzie’s eldest sister, Jane (Rosamund Pike), are besotted with each other almost instantaneously, Darcy makes a significantly less favourable impression upon the people of the county, particularly Lizzie, who swears to “loathe him for all eternity.” Despite this declaration, and after a rejected marriage proposal, Darcy’s loyalty and decency becomes clear when he saves the reputation of the Bennet sisters by enabling Lizzie’s sister Lydia to marry Wickham, the rakish soldier with whom she ran away. Lizzie is then ambushed by Darcy’s aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh (Dame Judi Dench), who has heard a rumour of Lizzie and Darcy’s engagement, and demands that such an engagement will never be entered into. Lizzie refuses, and upon hearing

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of her refusal, Darcy returns to once again offer his hand in marriage, a proposal that is accepted by both Lizzie and her father.

Wright’s adaptation has proven extraordinarily successful at the box office, grossing over $120 million worldwide since its release, and garnering four Academy Award nominations, including “Best Actress” for Keira Knightley.\(^{58}\) One explanation for this success is that the film taps into, and then symbolically resolves, contemporary concerns and anxieties resulting from increasing economic disparities, especially in terms of young people’s inability to enter the housing market. As Nick Couldry has argued, “[i]f one narrative dominates our times, it is that of global economic crisis.”\(^{59}\) *Pride & Prejudice* was released in 2005, three years prior to the global financial crisis of 2008-2009. At this point, western societies were characterised by “the bubble culture of the twenty-first century,”\(^{60}\) where prices for housing and other commodity markets steadily increased, and employment became increasingly casualised. This bubble culture priced low and middle-income earners out of the housing market, and had a substantial impact on the ability of young people to become home-owners, and thus independent of their parents and/or families. As a result, Catherine Stewart-Beer has argued,

young men and women are often forced, because of a precipitously expensive housing market, to live with their parents and are therefore rendered unable fully to take on the onerous responsibilities of adulthood, suspended in a false state of prolonged childhood.\(^{61}\)

This anxiety over the prolonged childhood of young people arguably underpins Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice*. As Stewart-Beer further notes, “Elizabeth, along with her sisters, is notably excluded from major ongoing ‘adult’ discussions . . . perpetuating a sense of infantilism.”\(^{62}\) In accordance with contemporary norms that equate moving


\(^{62}\) Stewart-Beer, “Style Over Substance?”
into one’s own home with adulthood, Lizzie cannot be considered an adult, and is thus infantilised accordingly. To symbolically resolve this anxiety and reaffirm Lizzie’s role as heroine despite this infantilisation, the film’s prioritisation of speech, epitomised by Lizzie’s hyper-verbosity, functions as a way to establish personal autonomy in a contemporary society in which the traditional trappings of adulthood are becoming increasingly inaccessible. Given that homeownership and stable employment are becoming increasingly difficult for younger women and men to attain, the feminist tradition of speech as evidence of autonomy and empowerment arguably becomes an important site at which the key neoliberal and postfeminist qualities of “personal empowerment” and “individualism” become realisable. Within such a context, speech practices become imbued with an even greater significance, perhaps accounting for the increase in adaptations of classic texts of the feminist canon that feature outspoken heroines, such as Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Eyre and Bathsheba Everdene.

In order to resolve the latent anxiety of this film, Wright and screenwriter Moggach have opted to emphasise the verbosity of one of literature’s most outspoken heroines. By emphasising Lizzie’s outspokenness and extensive vocabulary within her relationships with Darcy and her mother, the film establishes a link between Lizzie’s speech and her personal autonomy within a society that generally curtails women’s access to freedom. The film achieves this through the combined expansion and reduction of the novel’s original dialogue in specific scenes – by giving Lizzie an extra line, or withholding the dialogue of other characters so that Lizzie has the final word of the scene – and as a result Lizzie’s relationship to other characters, is subtly altered. The result is a hyper-verbal Lizzie, who consistently trumps an increasingly “bewitched”63 Darcy in their famous verbal stoushes. Indeed, as Nora Stovel has argued, “Knightley’s Elizabeth is more outspoken than any predecessor in fiercely criticising Darcy,”64 and this relationship to Darcy is carefully shaped to ensure that Lizzie’s verbal superiority, and thus personal autonomy, is never threatened. Furthermore, Lizzie’s relationship with her mother is particularly telling of the struggle of western young adults to establish their own sense of individualism while they remain for longer periods within the familial home. Indeed, it is through exploring

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63 Stewart-Beer, “Style over Substance?”
Lizzie’s relationships with her mother and Darcy that the emphasis on speech as the key to establishing personal autonomy, particularly in a cultural context characterised by anxiety about the social position of young people, becomes evident.

The Meryton Ball

The first of the scenes that highlights the centrality of speech in this adaptation occurs early within the film, at a public dance in Meryton, and is significant for the way it introduces the two strands of postfeminist speech that inform the adaptation more broadly: speech as evidence of autonomy, empowerment and separation from one’s parents; and speech that articulates the “battle of the sexes.” At this point in the film, an enchanted Mr Bingley has danced several times with an equally interested Jane, while the socially awkward Mr Darcy has both spurned Elizabeth’s attempts at pleasantries (when asked if he dances, he responds with a brusque “Not if I can help it”) and then been overheard by Lizzie when he dismisses her beauty altogether while in conversation with Mr Bingley. (When asked if he thinks Lizzie agreeable, he responds with the famous lines: “Perfectly tolerable, I dare say. But not handsome enough to tempt me”). The following scene then occurs between dances, when Lizzie, Jane and Mrs Bennet are conversing with Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy:

BINGLEY: Your friend Miss Lucas is a most amusing young woman.
LIZZIE: Oh yes, I adore her.
MRS BENNET: It is a pity she’s not more handsome.
LIZZIE: Mama!
MRS BENNET: Oh, but Lizzie will never admit that she’s plain. Of course, it’s my Jane who is considered the beauty of the county –
LIZZIE: No, no, Mama, please –
MRS BENNET: When she was only fifteen there was a gentleman so much in love with her that I was sure he would make her an offer, however, he did write her some very pretty verses –
LIZZIE: And that put paid to it. I wonder who first discovered the power of poetry in driving away love?
DARCY: I thought that poetry was the food of love.
LIZZIE: Of a fine stout love it may. But if it is only a vague inclination I am convinced one poor sonnet would kill it stone dead.
DARCY: So what do you recommend, to encourage affection?

LIZZIE: Dancing. Even if one’s partner is barely tolerable.

The first half of the scene draws attention to Lizzie’s strained relationship with her mother, thus justifying Lizzie’s attempts throughout the film to separate herself from her mother’s authority. The differences between the novel and the adaptation of this scene are slight, but conspire to depict Lizzie’s dismissal of her mother as more emphatic in the film than the novel. Within the novel, for example, Elizabeth does not interrupt her mother during this episode, but instead waits until Mrs Bennet is finished speaking before interjecting with her idea that poetry “driv[es] away love.”

Furthermore, the end of the exchange in the novel sees Elizabeth “trembl[ing] lest her mother should . . . expose herself again.” Here, the audience are faced with a protagonist that, as Walter E. Anderson has asserted, “never disparages her [mother] before others.”

There is a respect here, if not for her mother’s social faux pas and vulgarities, then for a social etiquette that demands the illusion of familial respect in public. In contrast, Wright’s Lizzie interrupts her mother twice in an attempt to halt Mrs Bennet’s boasting of Jane’s desirability to the wealthy Mr Bingley. These interruptions arguably work on two contradictory levels. Firstly, Lizzie is outwardly “resisting” association with her mother’s values and behaviours, by making clear that she does not approve of Mrs Bennet’s public discussion of Jane’s previous (and thus current and future) marriage prospects. Indeed, this resistance to her mother’s values and behaviours is perhaps Lizzie’s first assertion of adult individualism where, through trying to stop her mother from embarrassing herself and her daughters, Lizzie makes clear that she has her own values and expectations of appropriate behaviour.

Secondly, and undercutting this initial expression of Lizzie’s separation from her mother, is the way that Lizzie’s double interruption of her mother ultimately draws more attention to the inappropriateness of the conversation. Indeed, by pleading with her mother, Lizzie is ultimately making her mother more of a spectacle, and further

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highlights the discord that exists between mother and daughter. Thus within this scene, personal autonomy is emphasised over any notion of family unity or respect for elders. This disjunct between adaptation and source text is significant, as it reflects a contemporary emphasis upon personal autonomy and individualism for the postfeminist subject, at the expense of ideas about familial forbearance.

In contrast, the second half of the exchange focuses more on the burgeoning sexual tension between Lizzie and Mr Darcy, and draws attention to the ways that postfeminist speech, at least within this film, often relies on the trope of a “battle of the sexes” to make meaning. This is evident in the final two lines of the dialogue, neither of which are based on the novel. The differences between the novel and the film are stark: within the novel Darcy’s response to Elizabeth’s assertion that

[O]f a fine, stout, healthy love [poetry] may [be the food of love].
Every thing nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet would starve it entirely away

is a silent smile, registering appreciation and amusement at her wit, but refusing to engage the topic further. In contrast, the film extends this exchange by two new sentences, prioritising the dialogue between Darcy and Lizzie in order to emphasise Lizzie’s verbal dominance over the rude Mr Darcy. Indeed, Lizzie’s answer to Darcy’s question, although brief, is important, as it evokes both instances of Darcy’s previous rudeness to her. When he questions what might be used in place of poetry to “encourage affection,” she responds with a playful “dancing, even if one’s partner is barely tolerable.” Here, she alludes to both her previous attempt to converse with him, as well as his overheard dismissal of her. The addition of these extra two lines thus emphasises Lizzie’s outspokenness, quick-wittedness and mastery of language.

Significantly, the addition of these two lines also alters the framework of Darcy’s attraction to Lizzie; rather than being taken by “the beautiful expression of her dark eyes” as in the novel, Darcy’s interest in Lizzie is based on “her speech, rather than her looks,” as Juliette Wells has noted. Indeed, the scene prior has established that

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70 Austen, Pride and Prejudice, 49.
72 Wells, “A Fearsome Thing to Behold?”
Darcy, as in the novel, does not find Lizzie “handsome enough to tempt [him].” The temporally close pairing of his dismissal of her looks, and his subsequent interest in her opinions, indicated by his questioning of what she thinks encourages affection, thus emphasises the desirability of speech and intelligence in feminist protagonists.

Furthermore, the addition of these two lines of dialogue arguably change the tenor of the scene entirely as, rather than Lizzie and Darcy being relatively equally matched in terms of wit, Wright’s adaptation positions Lizzie as clearly verbally superior to Darcy, as evidenced by the way she is given the final line of the scene, thus leaving Darcy speechless. By the end of the scene, Lizzie has thus established both her separation from her mother’s values, and her ability to verbally dominate her later love interest. That speech and speech patterns are emphasised within this adaptation to an extent not realised in the novel indicates the prioritisation of speaking within this film, and the relationships between speech and autonomy that shape the film more broadly.

**Lizzie and Mrs Bennet**

Lizzie’s desire for separation from her mother, as first explored within this exchange at the ball, is further evinced within two later scenes. While these interactions may be brief, they are significant for the way they alter the tenor of Lizzie’s relationship with her mother from one of forbearance to emphatic rejection. The first of these two scenes occurs the day after the first ball, when Jane has been invited to dine with Caroline Bingley. Rather than allowing Jane to borrow the carriage for her journey, Mrs Bennet declares that Jane shall ride a horse instead, hoping that she will get caught in the impending rainstorm, and then need to stay at Netherfield Hall in close proximity to Mr Bingley. This plan is ultimately successful, as Jane becomes unwell after being caught in the rain, and is unable to return home for a period. This particular scene occurs when Lizzie receives and reads out the following letter from Jane:

LIZZIE: “My kind friends will not hear of me returning home until I am better. Do not be alarmed, excepting a sore throat, a fever and a headache, there is nothing much wrong with me.” This is ridiculous!

MR BENNET: Well, if Jane does die, it will be a comfort to know it was in pursuit of Mr Bingley.
MRS BENNET: People do not die of colds.

LIZZIE: But she may well perish with the shame of having such a mother. I must go to Netherfield at once.

Here, the extra line of dialogue inserted into the scene is Lizzie’s admonishment to her mother that Jane “may well perish from the shame of having such a mother.” Lizzie is clearly upset that her mother’s interference has resulted in Jane’s current predicament, and does not let the moment pass without expressing her dissatisfaction with her mother’s behaviour. Here, Lizzie seeks to establish her moral superiority, and perhaps authority, over her mother by condemning her as bringing shame to Jane, the most morally and socially irreproachable of all the family. Indeed, bringing the term “shame” into this scene is significant for, as Elspeth Probyn has argued, “[w]hat makes shame remarkable is that it reveals with precision our values, hopes, and aspirations, beyond the generalities of good manners and cultural norms.”

By ascribing the absent Jane a presumed sense of shame, Lizzie is drawing attention to the ways that their mother is failing to uphold the moral standards to which Jane and Lizzie adhere, and thus the negative impact Mrs Bennet can have on Jane’s future. Significantly, by ascribing shame to Jane rather than herself, and thus implicating Jane within a web of relationality, Lizzie’s own sense of separation and autonomy from her family also remains unchallenged. In other words, Jane’s alleged shame is deployed to further buttress the autonomy cultivated by Lizzie through exchanges with her mother.

Lizzie’s struggle to establish selfhood autonomous from her mother is further emphasised towards the end of the film, when Lizzie’s younger sister Lydia has run away with the pernicious Mr Wickham. Prior to this scene, Mrs Bennet has retired to her bedroom, her grief about her daughter’s behaviour and loss of reputation interspersed with her complete conviction that Mr Bennet will die in a duel with Mr Wickham. When news is received that the missing Lydia has been recovered, and that Lydia and Wickham are to be married, however, Mrs Bennet is overcome with joy, and begins preparations to celebrate the nuptials:

MRS BENNET: Lydia married? And at fifteen too? Ring the bell, Kitty. I must put on my things and tell Lady Lucas. Oh, to see her face! And tell the servants they will have a bowl of punch.

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LIZZIE: We should thank our uncle, Mama.

MRS BENNET: And so he should help. He’s far richer than us and has no children. A daughter, married!

LIZZIE: Is that really all you think about?

MRS BENNET: When you have five daughters, Lizzie, tell me what else will occupy your thoughts, and then perhaps you will understand.

LIZZIE: You don’t know what he’s like.

Here, the tensions between Lizzie and her mother become more pronounced, as Mrs Bennet’s apparent blindness to any concern other than the marrying of her daughters infuriates Lizzie. In dialogue newly written for the film, a frustrated Lizzie snaps “Is that really all you think about?” in response to her mother’s sense of entitlement to her brother’s money, and insensitive gloating over Lydia’s finally-assured marriage. This dialogue again scorns Mrs Bennet, as her absolute joy at the news of Lydia’s marriage indicates an obliviousness to the damage already done to the family by Lydia’s actions. Indeed, her happiness, and desire to gloat to Lady Lucas, appears to condone, or at least to a certain extent accept, Lydia’s actions; a remarkably tone-deaf position to take. Yet, unlike in other exchanges between Lizzie and her mother, where Mrs Bennet appears oblivious to Lizzie’s dismissiveness, within this particular exchange Mrs Bennet counter-chastises the self-righteous Lizzie, briefly silencing Lizzie’s disdain for her with a rhetorical question that draws attention to the pressures of providing for the future of five daughters from a limited financial position.

Significantly, Mrs Bennet’s question of “when you have five daughters, tell me what else will occupy your thoughts” works to complicate the politics of speech within the film, as Mrs Bennet’s speech is never coded as “empowered” in the way that Lizzie’s is. Indeed, throughout the film, Mrs Bennet periodically draws attention to the uncertain futures faced by her daughters, due to the entailing of the Bennet’s estate to the next closest male heir. One example of Mrs Bennet’s concern about her daughters’ future occurs the morning after the Meryton dance, when she tells Mr Bennet, “When you die, Mr Bennet, which may in fact be very soon, our girls will be left without a roof over their head nor a penny to their name!” This statement is followed by a frustrated Lizzie imploring, “Oh, Mama, please, it’s ten in the morning!” Indeed, there is a consistent pattern throughout this film of Mrs Bennet’s necessary and reasonable concerns being undermined and dismissed by protagonist Lizzie. Indeed, given that
Lizzie is the protagonist, the audience is positioned to share her perspective, viewing Mrs Bennet as hysterical and/or ridiculous despite the fact that she, along with Charlotte Lucas, offers the most identifiably feminist sentiments of the film. The relationship between Lizzie and her mother in this film thus suggests that, in a postfeminist context, speech is imbued with empowerment only when it is focused inwards towards the individual, rather than outward, towards the inequalities of social structures. In other words, the focus on separation within the relationship between Lizzie and her mother in Wright’s adaptation demonstrates that it is only certain types of speech within a postfeminist text that can be considered “empowered”, thus shoring up the aggressive individualism of both the postfeminist and neoliberal contexts in which this film was produced.

**Lizzie and Mr Darcy**

The separation between Lizzie and her mother also characterises, to a certain extent, Lizzie’s engagements with Mr Darcy. By this I mean that the deployment of the postfeminist trope of the “battle of the sexes” within this adaptation works to establish Lizzie as autonomous, intelligent, outspoken and in control. One of the scenes in which this trope is particularly evident, and deployed in a way that undermines the original sentiments of the novel, occurs at Rosings Park, when Lizzie has been exhorted by Lady Catherine de Bourgh to play the piano, despite Lizzie’s protestations. The scene is as follows:

LIZZIE: You mean to frighten me, Mr Darcy, by coming in all your state to hear me. But I won’t be alarmed, even if your sister does play so well.

DARCY: I am well enough acquainted with you, Miss Elizabeth, to know that I cannot alarm you, even should I wish it.

COL. FITZWILLIAM: What was my friend like in Hertfordshire?

LIZZIE: You really care to know? Prepare yourself for something very dreadful. The first time I saw him at the assembly, he danced with nobody at all. Even though gentlemen were scarce, and there was more than one young lady sitting down without a partner

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DARCY: I knew nobody beyond my own party.
LIZZIE: Oh, and nobody can be introduced in a ballroom.

DARCY: I do not have the talent of conversing easily with people I have never met before.
LIZZIE: Perhaps you should take your aunt’s advice, and practise.

There are several significant alterations within this scene that make clear the film’s prioritisation, and valorisation, of Lizzie’s outspokenness. The first difference is the change of sentiment within the first two lines of dialogue. Within the film, Lizzie’s suggestion that he is attempting to alarm her is repudiated by Mr Darcy, who affirms Lizzie’s view of herself as strong and in control, by stating that he could not alarm her “even should [he] wish it.” This is significant, as it emphasises the way that Lizzie has been able to successfully establish herself as an autonomous individual with a firm sense of self. Lizzie has thus established her dominance over Darcy early, as they both agree on her particular character-formation. The tone of this scene is markedly different to the original text, which is as follows:

‘You mean to frighten me, Mr Darcy, by coming in all this state to hear me? But I will not be alarmed though your sister does play so well. There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me.’

‘I shall not say that you are mistaken,’ he replied ‘because you could not really believe me to entertain any design of alarming you; and I have had the pleasure of your acquaintance long enough to know, that you find great enjoyment in occasionally professing opinions which in fact are not your own.’

Here, Darcy professes a familiarity with Elizabeth’s character that acts, in some ways, as a recognition of a kindred spirit. He seems to know Elizabeth, or is coming to know Elizabeth, significantly better than Wright’s Darcy knows Lizzie. The two are also on a more equal footing here; the verbal repartee indicates an equality of wit that is generally missing from Wright’s version. Indeed, the reduced banter within Wright’s

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version highlights Lizzie’s superior mastery over language, thus installing her as the “winner” in this particular battle of the sexes.

The second half of the exchange is also altered from its original state, with the reduction of the dialogue again providing Lizzie with the final word of the scene. The original text is as follows:

‘My fingers,’ said Elizabeth, ‘do not move over this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women’s do. They have not the same force or rapidity, and do not produce the same expression. But then I have always supposed it to be my own fault – because I would not take the trouble of practising. It is not that I do not believe my fingers as capable as any other woman’s of superior execution.’ Darcy smiled and said, ‘You are perfectly right. You have employed your time much better. No one admitted to the privilege of hearing you, can think anything wanting. We neither of us perform to strangers.’

The sentiment of Lizzie’s dialogue is the same in both the film and the novel: there is nothing to stop Mr Darcy from social proficiency other than his own motivation and interest. What is important about the scene is that Darcy’s original response to Lizzie has been removed from the screenplay, thus rendering him speechless. By not using this section of the novel within the screenplay, the verbal banter between Lizzie and Darcy is markedly reduced, further constructing Darcy as Lizzie’s inferior, particularly when it comes to language use. Indeed, one of the ways that Lizzie’s outspokenness is rendered visible is through its contrast with Darcy’s silence and relative inarticulacy.

Lizzie’s verbal superiority over the inarticulate, and thus vulnerable, Darcy is further established through the “dawn love scene” when, in the wake of Lizzie’s refusal to declare her lack of interest in Darcy to Lady Catherine, Darcy returns to the Longbourn estate to make a final declaration of his love. The dialogue from the scene is as follows:

LIZZIE: I couldn’t sleep.
DARCY: Nor I. My aunt –
LIZZIE: Yes, she was here.
DARCY: How can I ever make amends for such behaviour?

76 Austen, Pride and Prejudice, 196-197.
LIZZIE: After what you have done for Lydia and, I suspect for Jane also, it is I who should be making amends.

DARCY: You must know. Surely you must know it was all for you. You are too generous to trifle with me. I believe you spoke with my aunt last night and it has taught me to hope as I’d scarcely allowed myself before. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes have not changed. But one word from you will silence me forever. If, however, your feelings have changed – I would have to tell you, you have bewitched me, body and soul, and I love – I love – I love you. I never wish to be parted from you from this day on.

LIZZIE: Well then. Your hands are cold.

Lizzie responds to this declaration of love, and display of emotional vulnerability, with a smile and says “Well then.” She then kisses Darcy’s hand, and states “Your hands are cold,” before the two finally kiss.

In contrast, the original text explains that Elizabeth responds to Darcy’s declaration positively, but does not specify her dialogue. The original text is as follows:

After a short pause, her companion added, “You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject for ever.”

Elizabeth, feeling all the more than common awkwardness and anxiety of his situation, now forced herself to speak; and immediately, though not very fluently, gave him to understand that her sentiments had undergone so material a change, since the period to which he alluded, as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure his present assurances.77

A comparison between the two texts indicates that the adaptation has extended Darcy’s dialogue to include a stammering declaration of his love for Lizzie, and altered Lizzie’s response considerably. Rather than expressing “that her sentiments had undergone so material a change . . . as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure

his present assurances,” Lizzie’s response does not address her own feelings at all. She demonstrates, rather than verbalises, her feelings through kissing his hand. This refusal to respond in kind to a declaration of love – a familiar trope in sitcoms, romantic comedies, and even Star Wars – indicates, at least briefly, an asymmetrical power relationship, where Darcy’s declaration of love, and thus emotional vulnerability, allows Lizzie to reaffirm her verbal superiority or power over him, through withholding her own, equalising, declaration. Through ending the conversation with a comment on Darcy’s hands, rather than her love for him, this scene allows Lizzie to enjoy the emotional fulfilment of knowing that she is loved, without needing to make herself emotionally vulnerable by expressing that she loves him in return.

Darcy’s dialogue has also been altered in significant ways for this scene – as indicated above, his dialogue has been extended to include a stammering declaration of love. The stammering in this scene is notable, and makes obvious the differences in speech mastery between the two. While Darcy can only stumble over love and bewitching, Lizzie is able to maintain her communicative superiority by speaking clearly and concisely, and of topics much more tangible. Here, her communicative repertoire appears more advanced than his, as she is able to indicate her reciprocation of his feelings without needing to express them out loud. By reaffirming Lizzie’s verbal superiority in a scene marked by Darcy’s emotional vulnerability, this scene suggests a relationship between a mastery over one’s speech and a guarding of one’s self against vulnerability; indeed, this scene indicates that through empowering one’s self through speech, emotional fulfilment without vulnerability becomes possible for the postfeminist young woman.

Taken together, then, the relationships Wright’s Lizzie has with both her mother and Mr Darcy make clear that this Lizzie is an autonomous individual who has mastered verbal sophistication in a way that marks all others as her inferior. Given that this film was produced in a time of increasing economic disparities, Lizzie’s outspokenness arguably resolves, or at least obscures, anxieties about the possibilities of postfeminist empowerment in an economic context characterised by young people’s marginalisation. In other words, Lizzie’s outspokenness demonstrates that

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postfeminist personal empowerment remains accessible through speech, even when other indicators of empowerment, such as consumerism or independence from one’s family, may not be as readily available. By resolving the film with a happy ending, as is the way of *Pride and Prejudice*, the economic insecurities that lurked in both the original text and the context of the film’s production thus become sidelined, and personal freedom is framed as the reward for those, like Lizzie, who do not compromise their individualism.

*Jane Eyre*

The latent anxiety in Wright’s *Pride and Prejudice* is amplified within Cary Fukunaga’s 2011 adaptation of *Jane Eyre*, a film produced within a cultural context characterised by the social and economic struggles of post-financial crisis recession. Before examining the politics of speech in Fukunaga’s adaptation, however, the original source text of *Jane Eyre* offers an important basis for comparison. Much like Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* has been a staple of the feminist canon, with the centrality of the politics of speech to the novel and its enactment of a feminist sensibility identified by multiple scholars over many years. Indeed, as Janet H. Freeman has argued,

[i]n *Jane Eyre*, the power of speech is supreme. It enables Jane to take more and more control of her life as the years pass and in the end to tell it to us. The gift of speech – and silence, its counterpart – of uttering words and hearing them spoken, dominates the world of *Jane Eyre* absolutely.\(^{80}\)

Its heroine’s power of speech is one of the aspects of the novel that has branded Bronte’s work as inherently feminist, and its repeated adaptations over the years make clear the fact that Jane’s story continues to tap into, and symbolically resolve enduring collective concerns.

There is also often a deeply personal element to feminist literary criticism of *Jane Eyre*; as Adrienne Rich has articulated,

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I have never lost the sense that *Jane Eyre* contains, through and beyond the force of its creator’s imagination, some nourishment I needed then and still need today. . . . *Jane Eyre* has for us now a special force and survival value.  

Given this central, and deeply emotionally invested, position of *Jane Eyre* in feminist literary criticism, any adaptation of *Jane Eyre* is implicated within a history of feminist engagement before it even begins. One of the most influential feminist approaches to Bronte’s text was penned by theorists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, whose ground-breaking feminist text *The Madwoman in the Attic* re-imagined the book’s “central confrontation”\(^{82}\) as being between Jane and Bertha Mason, whom they classify as Jane’s truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead.  

This focus on Jane’s anger is followed up by Marea Mitchell, who has identified Jane as being “considerably more confrontational than Pamela [from Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*] or Elizabeth [Bennet],” and that her “faculty of ‘fierce speaking’ also takes her further than her predecessors.”\(^{84}\) By comparing Jane to Pamela and Elizabeth, Mitchell has firmly grounded Jane in a tradition of feisty and articulate fictional heroines. However, it is not only the construction of Jane as a character and the plot events that encourage such a reading; the very structure of the novel also facilitates a feminist politics of speech. This is particularly visible through the use of the first person narrative voice; as Ashly Bennet has argued, “*Jane Eyre*’s distinctive ‘I’ has often seemed bolstered, especially by the emotional display and pull of that voice.”\(^{85}\) Clearly

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84. Mitchell and Osland, *Representing Women and Female Desire from Arcadia to Jane Eyre*, 186. See also: Ellis and Kaplan, “Feminism in Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and Its Film Versions,” 192.

then, whether Jane is speaking to other characters within the text or addressing the reader, an examination of the politics of speech and silence is central to understanding *Jane Eyre*. Importantly, this prioritisation of speech and silence has been preserved in the latest *Jane Eyre* adaptation, although the film’s interpretation of these concerns has inevitably been refracted through the anxieties that characterise the post-global financial crisis recession of its production context.

*Jane Eyre* in the Recession

Cary Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre*, released in 2011, and grossing over $34.5 million worldwide, is a retelling of Charlotte Bronte’s 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*. Starting from two-thirds of the way through Bronte’s canonical text, Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre* follows protagonist Jane Eyre (Mia Wasikowska) as she escapes from the imposing and gloomy Thornfield Hall. Finding sanctuary in the home of St John Rivers (Jamie Bell) and his sisters Mary (Tamzin Merchant) and Diana (Holliday Grainger), the film deploys a flashback structure to tell the story of a young Jane Eyre as she is bullied by her Aunt’s family, sent to the cruel Lowood School for education, and then accepts a job as the governess at the aforementioned Thornfield Hall, where she teaches the young Adele Varens (Romy Settbon Moore). Framing these flashbacks, and thus the rest of the narrative, is Jane’s life after leaving Thornfield, where she is offered a teaching position at a local parish school, thus providing her with her first experience of personal independence. Through the course of the narrative, it is revealed that Jane falls in love with the brooding master of the estate, Edward Fairfax Rochester (Michael Fassbender). As their love grows, strange events begin to happen around Thornfield Hall, events that are explained on their wedding day, when Rochester confesses that he is already married to the dangerous Bertha Rochester nee Mason (Valentina Cervi), who he keeps locked in Thornfield’s attic. Upon discovery of Rochester’s attempted bigamy, Jane escapes the Hall, thus bringing the audience to the point at which the film began. While working at the parish school in the film’s “present,” Jane inherits a sizeable amount of money from one of her deceased relatives, thus ensuring her independence, as well as the independence of the Rivers family. Once re-ensconced in the Rivers’ family home, a zealous St John presses Jane to marry him, so that they may

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become missionaries to India. Jane repeatedly refuses and, in one of the narrative’s most supernatural moments, hears Rochester’s voice calling her on the wind. She returns to Thornfield Hall, ready to live by his side, but discovers its blackened ruins, as Bertha has finally succeeded in burning her prison down. Now freed from his marriage, but blinded and disabled, Jane is able to return to Rochester on equal terms: her financially independent, and him free of his “demon.”

Fukunaga’s Jane Eyre, like Wright’s Pride & Prejudice before it, is a film laced with anxiety, although that anxiety manifests differently. Pride & Prejudice relies on Lizzie’s hyper-verbosity to establish her personal empowerment and autonomy, whereas Jane Eyre’s anxiety is manifested through the early framing of the film in terms of a narrative of trauma, and the concomitant wary silence of its protagonist. The differences between these films are explained not only by the differences in the original texts, but also by their release dates, relative to the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. While Pride & Prejudice was produced and released during “the bubble culture of the twenty-first century,”87 Jane Eyre was produced and released in 2011, in the aftermath of the recession caused by the “bursting” of this bubble culture in 2008. The consequences of the recession were significant and far-reaching, as financial institutions collapsed and world markets went into freefall. As a result, austerity measures88 and values were increasingly established, or at least rhetorically evoked, in many western societies, and questions continue to be asked about the structures of society and investing practices that facilitated late capitalism’s grand fall from grace. In the wake of the global financial crisis, there have been significant changes in terms of the labour-market, wealth-creation, personal loans and credit-card debt, and the state of national debt the world over. Thus, the palpable anxiety and austerity of Jane Eyre, released in 2011, is undoubtedly responding to the global financial crisis and its austerity-driven aftermath.

Significantly, the production of Jane Eyre in the aftermath of the global financial crisis perhaps mirrors Jane’s appeal to, and indeed reflection of, austerity measures and values more broadly; as Leah McLaren has noted:

In times of austerity, Jane is our most enduring literary heroine. Her sense of justice, her moral fortitude . . . her stubborn insistence on substance over style and principles over playfulness, are exactly the qualities audiences crave in times of uncertainty, when we are suffering from the hangover of decadence past.89

This sense of austerity pervades the film, from the muted, darkened tones of the cinematography to the costuming. There is also a vastness and desolation to the shots of nature that Fukunaga favours; Jane is often a tiny figure within an impossibly large environment. Fukunaga’s adaptation of Jane Eyre thus is, as Claire Monk has incisively argued,

what a twenty-first-century big screen adaptation of one of the most widely known and studied (and adapted) nineteenth century novels in the English literary canon looks like at a moment when a globalised entertainment industry meets a Zeitgeist of austerity and uncertainty.90

And this uncertainty manifests particularly through the film’s politics of speech. While the Jane of Bronte’s novel is known for her powerful narrative voice, Fukunaga’s Jane is much more dialogically reserved, and the reduced dialogue of this adaptation has garnered widespread comments from reviewers of the film. Using terms and phrases such as “austere”91 and “spare”92 to describe the film, and “quiet”93 or even “mute hysteric”94 to explain Jane more specifically, these reviews make clear that Jane is popularly understood as an outspoken heroine, and that Fukunaga’s changes to her dialogue and characterisation, whether deemed positive or negative, are worthy of

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90 Monk, “Eyre Conditioning,” 44.
notice. In other words, the politics of speech within *Jane Eyre* remains one of the key frameworks through which we make meaning of the film’s narrative.

**Trauma in *Jane Eyre***

Before exploring the film’s politics of speech, however, the structure of the adaptation is worthy of note, for the film’s politics of speech are significantly impacted by the adaptation’s alteration of the narrative structure. Indeed, the structure of Fukunaga’s adaptation is particularly significant as, rather than beginning the narrative from the beginning of the novel, the film begins with an extremely distressed Jane running away from Thornfield Hall, thus necessitating a flashback structure. This new structure is significant for several reasons. Firstly, as Meghan Jordan has identified, by beginning the film with Jane leaving Thornfield Hall, rather than as an unwanted child in her aunt’s home, Jane is reconstructed as “always-already a subject, unique in her ability to know and articulate her desires.”95 In this way, Fukunaga’s Jane is not unlike Lizzie Bennet in Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice*; both characters are imbued with an anachronistic sense of postfeminist empowerment and autonomy, that allows them to “rise above . . . restrictive institutions, because [they] have a singular power to do so.”96 In other words, both protagonists are able, due to their personal exceptionality (read adherence to postfeminist notions of “personal empowerment”), to transcend the rigid social structures that constrain their peers. Their shared transcendence of restrictive patriarchal structures, evident within their unconventional happily ever afters (both marry “above their station”) thus works to affirm contemporary notions of personal responsibility for one’s own happiness, which is presumed to be achieved through personal empowerment.

However, by opening the film with Jane’s escape from Thornfield Hall, Fukunaga also reframes *Jane Eyre* as a trauma narrative, a decision that brings the latent anxiety of *Pride & Prejudice* to the fore. While the audience do not yet know what has happened (or if they are familiar with the story of *Jane Eyre*, the particulars of this adaptation’s approach to the “madwoman in the attic”), we are faced with a young woman’s grief for the sense of safety, security, and perhaps even future, that she has

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lost. And there is no glossing over of this grief; we watch Jane struggle for three wordless minutes, as the terrain she traverses becomes increasingly difficult, and made even more so by an incoming storm. She appears lost, she stumbles and falls, she is saturated and completely alone in the vast moorlands. Still she pushes on until, weakened and semi-conscious, Jane ends up at the door of St John Rivers and his sisters. It is here, in St John River’s house, that dialogue finally enters the film. Initially, the words of St John and his sisters are muffled, as we are hearing from the perspective of a half-conscious Jane. Significantly, Jane’s first words of the film that bears her name are a mumbled “Must hide.” The trauma of this narrative is thus inscribed not only into the structure of the film, but also within the film’s opening dialogue.

Notably, this is an aesthetic that is replicated in the opening sequence of Sophie Barthes’ 2015 rendering of Flaubert’s Madame Bovary. The parallels between these two scenes, both in terms of the films’ flashback structure and trauma narrative, are amplified because the actress Mia Wasikowska is the protagonist in each. The similarities between these two adaptations is curious, given that Jane Eyre and Emma Bovary might be considered moral opposites; when faced with the possibilities for adultery, Jane refused, while Emma acquiesced. Both of these decisions, however, draw attention to the rigid gender codes that functioned to constrain women’s freedom and agency within the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, constraints that are allegedly no longer experienced by contemporary women, at least according to neoliberal and postfeminist logics. Yet the silence of the protagonists in each of these opening sequences, and the prioritisation of affect over explanation, also perhaps works to centralise a sense of collective grief or mourning over the uncertainty of the future. Importantly, this grief is not specific to economic uncertainty, but perhaps also encompasses grief for a lost feminism, and a lost period allegedly characterised by simpler gender relations, which feminism is accused of needlessly complicating. This nostalgia can also be seen in white women’s longing for innocence of their complicity in racial oppression, a theme I return to in Chapter Three. The global financial crisis has, in some ways, brought such anxieties to the forefront of western culture, as the loss of a belief in certain economic prosperity throws questions of continuing oppression and discrimination into sharp relief. The anxiety of Jane Eyre is thus perhaps so palpable because it is responding not only to economic stressors, but also
the anxiety of unequal and discriminatory social relations that have never been fully resolved.

While drifting in and out of consciousness, Jane then begins to recall a traumatic incident from her past. That she is lost in a memory is first indicated by a voiceover; while we see Jane in the Rivers’ kitchen, we hear a voice softly, tauntingly, calling, “where are you, rat?” The scene then merges with the voiceover, and we are presented with an incident from Jane’s past, the entry point of Bronte’s novel, where a young Jane is hiding from her sword-wielding cousin, John Reed (Craig Roberts). This slippage between the past and the present, the conflation and overlaying of Jane’s abusive upbringing with whatever horror she has just escaped, makes clear that her life has been characterised by instability, anxiety and trauma. This focus on the trauma of Jane’s past is further exacerbated when, after recovering from her journey and dining with St John, Diana and Mary, she is asked if the education she received at Lowood School was “thorough.” Before Jane answers, the film briefly cuts to a close-up of a girl’s back being caned, with the unidentified girl gasping in pain, before cutting back to a composed Jane, who responds, “Most thorough.” The interjection of this brief scene, presumably a memory of Jane’s, works to ensure that the experience of trauma is never far from the surface of the film. Even when in a situation in which the trauma of the past appears far removed, such as when she lives with the Rivers, Jane occasionally loses herself in daydreams in which she recalls the traumas of her past. While of course a narrative function that tells Jane’s story, the fact that these sections of the narrative are told via flashback perhaps indicates a working-through of Jane’s trauma; by reliving these memories in a safe space (in this case, the Rivers’ home), Jane is able to process, and thus possibly resolve, the traumas she has previously experienced. Indeed, Jane’s ability to triumph at the end of the film, despite her challenges, thus arguably imbues her with the ability to work through, and then achieve, “a symbolic resolution of collective concerns”97 for the recession audience.

The collective anxiety foregrounded by the film’s framing as a trauma narrative is further buttressed by Jane’s striking and repeated silences within the film. In some ways, the silence that characterises this particular film is more significant than the scenes prioritising Jane’s speech, for the Jane of Bronte’s novel is a heroine known for

her narrative voice and faculties of “fierce speaking.”98 Indeed unlike Lizzie, her counterpart in the canon of outspoken feminist protagonists, Jane is remarkably silent within Fukunaga’s adaptation. While screenwriter Moira Buffini “preserves important elements of [Bronte’s] language,”99 Jane’s inner monologue, her powerful narrative voice, is removed, and replaced with many dialogue-less scenes. These dialogue-free scenes include, but are not limited to: Jane’s two escapes from Thornfield Hall, due to the film’s flashback structure; Jane’s arrival and first experience of education at Lowood School; Jane’s melancholia when Mr Rochester leaves Thornfield Hall after she saves him from a fire; Jane’s spending of time with Mr Rochester after he proposes to her; and Jane’s grief after being shown Bertha Mason. This is not an exhaustive list of all the dialogue-free scenes in the film, but makes clear how often Jane is silent within this film.

Significantly, several of these silent scenes occur during Jane’s tenure at Lowood School, including her initial arrival at the school, and her punishment on the “Pedestal of Infamy.” Within these scenes, Jane’s silence is either the result of wariness, such as when she arrives at the school and is treated with efficient detachment by Miss Scatcherd, or enforced as a punishment, such as when Jane drops her writing slate during class. In both cases, Jane’s silence occurs in response to the dictates of a patriarchal religious institution whose mission is, according to Mr Brocklehurst, “to render [the girls] contrite and self-denying.” Importantly, these are particularly gendered traits that engineer women’s silent passivity, and thus shore up men’s presumed superiority more broadly; as Spender has argued, “the need for women’s silence in [a] patriarchal order . . . is a prerequisite for male supremacy.”100 In other words, the school’s silencing of its students is a deliberate strategy to teach the girls their rightful place in the wider world. The silence that characterises Jane’s time at Lowood thus acts as a framework through which to explore the restrictions placed on girls and women in a patriarchal society.

While silence may thus be particularly marked in this adaptation, speech also maintains a central role in reaffirming the film’s postfeminist sensibility, and is perhaps

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98 Mitchell and Osland, Representing Women and Female Desire from Arcadia to Jane Eyre, 186.
100 Spender, Man Made Language, 101.
emphasised because of the film’s broader deployment of silence. The preservation of much of Bronte’s language within this film has meant that much of the feminist analysis of the politics of speech in Bronte’s work is transferable to Fukunaga’s adaptation. There is, however, a new scene that, alongside other scenes that prioritise Jane’s narrative voice, indicates a tension between the film’s representation of anxiety and the more optimistic discourses of individualism and personal empowerment that are central to neoliberalism and postfeminism. This new exchange between Jane and Rochester is a combination of dialogue from the text that has been moved from a different narrative moment, together with an especially created line of questioning. At this point in the film, Jane has been presented to Rochester for the first time at Thornfield Hall, and he has begun to question her about her past. While Rochester does question Jane in the novel, albeit later in the narrative, this new line of questioning emphasises Jane’s veneer of personal empowerment and concomitant refusal of victimhood. The exchange is as follows:

ROCHESTER: And from whence do you hail? What’s your tale of woe?
JANE: Pardon?
ROCHESTER: All governesses have a tale of woe. What’s yours?
JANE: I was brought up by my aunt, Mrs Reed of Gateshead, in a house even finer than this. I then attended Lowood School, where I received as good an education as I could hope for. I have no tale of woe, sir.
ROCHESTER: And why are you not with Mrs Reed of Gateshead now?
JANE: She cast me off, sir.
ROCHESTER: Why?
JANE: Because I was burdensome and she disliked me.
ROCHESTER: No tale of woe?

The addition of this exchange, particularly the phrase “tale of woe” indicates the prioritisation of notions of personal empowerment over acknowledgment of collective issues within neoliberal postfeminism. Jane’s silence about the systemic oppression and victimhood which has characterised her life serves to identify her as an agentic and autonomous individual who, “regardless of whatever anguish she may experience,

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101 See, for example: Kaplan, The Erotics of Talk, 77; Ellis and Kaplan, “Feminism in Bronte’s Jane Eyre and Its Film Versions,” 194-195.
refuses to make her sense of having suffered unjustly into the center of her being.”

Here, Jane separates herself from “other” governesses who have a tale of woe, and individualises her experience in terms of her poor relationship with her aunt, rather than a collective issue about the vulnerability of women in this period who did not have financial support from their families. By refusing to conceptualise her experiences in terms of collective or social victimhood, this adaptation thus reveals how silence can be both political and depoliticised. By refusing to “perform” for Rochester by detailing the suffering she has faced, Jane is presenting herself as a strong woman who will not speak simply for male entertainment. Simultaneously, however, by refusing to detail, or even acknowledge, the systemic and institutionalised oppression that she has faced, she is evacuating her lived experience of gender politics, and reinscribing her past as her own responsibility. In other words, while the dominance of the individualism discourse within this adaptation may re-imagine the character of Jane Eyre as the ideal postfeminist subject, it also erases the political nature of the original text, a text that traditionally “reveals social and psychological truths about women’s lives.”

Furthermore, through Jane’s reputation as a “feminist” character, this adaptation encourages an individualistic popular “feminism,” where acknowledgment of the impact social structures on individual’s lives indicates victimhood, rather than legitimate social critique.

**Conclusion**

Taken together, Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) and Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre* (2011) thus indicate the complex interplay between postfeminism and the politics of speech and silence within contemporary western culture. Produced in a period characterised by economic disparities, both adaptations address, and then symbolically resolve, this cultural anxiety, through the happy endings of their respective protagonists. Before those endings, however, both films draw our attention to the ways that the meanings of speech practices continue to be contested within popular culture. Significantly, both films push their protagonists to an extreme politics of

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102 Cole, “There Are No Victims In This Class,” 80.
speech; Lizzie is hyper-verbal in an almost desperate attempt to affirm speech practices as the ultimate expression of personal autonomy, while Jane, a protagonist known for her powerful narrative voice, is silent in a way that makes her almost unrecognisable to purist Jane Eyre fans. These extremes are in some ways two sides of the same coin; Lizzie is zealously outspoken in an attempt to shore up her beleaguered sense of empowerment, while Jane is wary of compromising her empowerment by narrating her “tale of woe.”

These adaptations thus provide useful meditations on politics of speech within a neoliberal and postfeminist cultural context. Jane’s wary silence, for example, works to complicate the notion that feminist heroines must be outspoken in order to intervene in patriarchal hierarchies. In contrast, Lizzie proves that the personal empowerment associated with feminist speech can at times manifest as disrespectful of others; within this adaptation, it is mainly Mrs Bennet who bears the brunt of Lizzie’s “empowerment,” but Darcy too, albeit to a lesser extent, is at times subjugated by Lizzie’s forceful speech. These films thus provide a useful snapshot of how the politics of speech and silence manifest within an anxious postfeminist popular culture, and make clear that feminist theories, while retaining their cultural currency, are far from simplified within contemporary western popular culture.
Chapter Three: “We Are the Working Classes”\textsuperscript{1}: Socialist Feminism in \textit{Erin Brockovich, North Country} and \textit{Made in Dagenham}

You are a woman in a capitalist society. You get pissed off: about the job, the bills, your husband (or ex), about the kids’ school, the housework, being pretty, not being pretty, being looked at, not being looked at (and either way, not listened to), etc. If you think about all these things and how they fit together and what has to be changed, and then you look around for some words to hold all these thoughts together in abbreviated form, you’d almost have to come up with “socialist feminism.”\textsuperscript{2}

- \textit{Barbara Ehrenreich, “What is Socialist Feminism?”}

In her 1976 article, Barbara Ehrenreich offers a compelling scene to account for why women might turn to socialist feminism. She articulates the many intersecting concerns that impact on how women are able to live their lives, identifying work, finances, family, femininity and a general silencing faced by many women on a daily basis as legitimate reasons for feeling “pissed off.” Indeed, through feeling “pissed off,” Ehrenreich alludes to the relationship between material conditions, affect, and activism, a relationship that I explore within this chapter in some depth. Specifically, I examine how three postfeminist historical women’s films – Steven Soderbergh’s \textit{Erin Brockovich} (2000), Niki Caro’s \textit{North Country} (2005) and Nigel Cole’s \textit{Made in Dagenham} (2010) – depict and complicate this relationship, and hence how these films can be read as indicating a renewed interest in the relevance of socialist feminism to contemporary western society, particularly within popular culture. Such an argument gains credence from the fact that Ehrenreich’s article was reprinted in 2005, suggesting that her explanation of socialist feminism retains not only its accessibility, but that its message may be resonating with a new generation of women for whom

\textsuperscript{1} “We are the working classes” is taken from the film \textit{Made in Dagenham}, when protagonist Rita O’Grady gives a speech at the Trade Union Conference, asking the other trade unions to support the Dagenham machinists’ fight for equal pay.

the dominant discourses of contemporary western society (particularly neoliberalism and postfeminism) lack appeal.

A resurgence of socialist feminism is arguably underway due to a contemporary turn to the scholarly field of “new materialism” which, as Diana Coole and Samantha Frost have argued,

testifies to a critical and nondogmatic reengagement with political economy, where the nature of, and relationship between, the material details of everyday life and broader geopolitical and socioeconomic structures is being explored afresh.\(^3\)

In other words, theoretical perspectives prioritising “the material” as an area of inquiry are once again becoming visible; there is a shift towards exploring the influence that global political and economic structures have on the material realities of individuals in both the public and private realms. Importantly, Coole and Frost have argued that “new materialism” acts as an umbrella term under which a range of theoretical approaches can gather, bonded by their “interest in the emergent materialities of contemporary coexistence.”\(^4\) Considering socialist feminism as one of the theoretical approaches associated with new materialisms recognises that a renewed interest in socialist feminist theory indicates, and is underpinned by, a broader academic and popular return to the body and the material.

While the following chapter engages with the ideas of socialist feminism, it is prudent to offer a working definition of “socialism” to further contextualise my analysis. Following Michael Newman, I understand socialism as an organisation of society based on the presence of several distinguishing characteristics:

1) a “commitment to the creation of an egalitarian society”;
2) a “challeng[ing] [of] the property relations that are fundamental to capitalism” and a concomitant “aspir[ation] to establish a society in which everyone has the possibility to seek fulfilment without facing barriers based on structural inequalities”;


\(^4\) Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 28.
3) “a belief in the possibility of constructing an alternative
egalitarian system based on the values of solidarity and cooperation”;

4) “a relatively optimistic view of human beings and their ability to
cooperate with one another,” and;

5) a belief that “it is possible to make significant changes in the
world through conscious human agency.”

While this definition may seem analogous to feminism, the theories of socialism
and Marxism are, as Heidi Hartmann has so shrewdly noted, “sex-blind.” By this she
means that theories of socialism, by virtue of their focus on the experience of the
worker under capitalism, are unable to account for the ways that gender (and race,
and other markers of identity) also work to privilege or subordinate certain groups of
people within a particular society. There is a rich history of socialist women working
through these sex-blind characteristics of the Left, such as Russian socialist Alexandra
Kollontai and German socialist Clara Zetkin, American activists in the 1960s such as
Dana Densmore and Naomi Wesstein, as well as theorists such as Barbara Easton,
Barbara Ehrenreich and Zillah Eisenstein, among countless others. These struggles

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have led many women to some form of socialist feminism, where class antagonism is positioned alongside analyses of race and gender, rather than prioritised over them.

This relationship between class, gender and race is thus central to the frameworks of analysis and goals of socialist feminism; indeed, Nancy Holmstrom has characterised as socialist feminist:

anyone trying to understand women’s subordination in a coherent and systematic way that integrates class and sex, as well as other aspects of identity such as race/ethnicity or sexual orientation, with the aim of using this analysis to help liberate women.\(^{12}\)

Importantly, both this definition and Ehrenreich’s explanation of why women might turn to socialist feminism gesture towards the affinity of socialist feminist theories with theories of intersectionality which, as Elżbieta Olensky has argued, are increasingly “used to cover the interconnections between various social differentials, such as gender, race, ethnic origin, age, disability, sexual orientation, and religion or belief.”\(^{13}\) Like socialist feminism, intersectional theories are particularly useful for a more rounded form of analysis. For example, considering the material realities resulting from a woman’s class position – the intersection of gender and class – draws the focus of analysis back to women’s broader material experiences, highlighting the ways that particular ideologies materially help or hinder specific groups of people. As ideologies of class have significant material consequences, it follows that material forms of intervention are required to achieve social change. This need for material interventions is also made clear through Holmstrom’s definition of socialist feminism: she posits that it is not enough to merely formulate analyses, one must use these analyses “to help liberate women.”\(^{14}\)

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\(^{14}\) Holmstrom, “Introduction,” 1.
Socialist Feminism In (And Out) of the Academy

While focusing on the material realities of women’s lives has been, and continues to be, a particularly productive position from which to engage in feminist analysis, shifting allegiances within the academy have recently sidelined socialist feminism in favour of identity politics, as well as a focus on ideas of culture and postmodernism. The ascendancy of postmodernism within the academy is pertinent for understanding the ebbing of socialist feminism in this period; as Larry Ray and Andrew Sayer have argued, “[p]ostmodernism itself is overwhelmingly cultural in its concerns, with economics notable by its absence, [and] political economy being presumably tainted by its association with materialism and grand narratives.” According to this perspective, then, it is its reliance on overarching and generalising narratives to explain social phenomena, and its qualified engagement with cultural practices, that has made materialism and its associated theories academically “unfashionable,” and thus set aside in favour of alternative forms of analysis.

This turn away from materialism and towards postmodernism has also influenced the ways that activism, dissent, and revolution have been conceptualised, and even enacted. Rita Felski, for example, has argued that

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\text{[t]he displacement of political action onto a variety of social practices which touch on all aspects of everyday life can . . . engender indifference toward broader political questions, a dismissal of systematic theoretical critique and a belief that introspection itself embodies a form of radical activity.}^17
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In other words, a possible consequence of the turn to identity politics and postmodernism is that the critique of the social order becomes turned inwards, encouraging the individual to find a sense of independent agency rather than broad

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social change. Socialist feminism’s historic focus on collective action is thus fundamentally at odds with the more individualistic expectations of the cultural turn.

Shifting trends between and amongst theoretical positions are inevitable within the academy, and the cultural turn is increasingly subject to critiques from the materialist (and socialist feminist) perspectives with which it has coexisted. For example, in their introduction to *Culture and Economy After the Cultural Turn*, Ray and Sayer argue that despite the current emphasis on culture,

> [t]his does not mean that culture is everything, that the only thing that goes on in society is signifying practice, or that the signifying aspects of practices and artefacts exhaust all we need know about them. Things also happen to people regardless of discourses or the level of meaning, and the effects of the formal economy are particularly important in this respect.\(^{18}\)

Ironically, while some theoretical perspectives once deemed materialism inadequate and “complicit with many injustices,”\(^{19}\) its engagement with political and economic structures is now seen to offer complex and nuanced answers to questions that touch upon both the individual and the social, and the complex relationship between the two. Socialist feminist theories, given their prioritisation of the material, are thus well-placed to offer intersectional forms of materialist critique and insight.

Indeed, such ideas resonate with Stevi Jackson’s 2001 deployment of the term “materialist feminism.”\(^{20}\) Jackson argues for “a version of materialist feminism that foregrounds the social . . . but that does not reduce all social structures, relations, and practices to capitalism.”\(^{21}\) While she perhaps does not wish to revive the term “socialist feminism” for fear of seeming “hopelessly passé”\(^{22}\) within an academic milieu still shaped by the cultural turn, the similarities between Jackson’s and Holmstrom’s definitions are evident. Given that these papers were published one year apart, and

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\(^{20}\) Jackson, “Why a Materialist Feminism is (Still) Possible—and Necessary,” 283-293.


remembering that Ehrenreich’s paper was reprinted in 2005, we can thus observe a turn back towards materialism and socialist feminism, not only in academia, but in popular culture as well. Hence, the release of *Erin Brockovich, North Country, and Made in Dagenham* between 2000 and 2010 can be read as an extended meditation on both the past and future of socialist feminism, both within academic institutions and popular culture at large. By reading the films through a socialist feminist lens, and considering how they depict the material realities, anger and collective action of their protagonists, I will demonstrate how the films dramatise a key strand of feminism thought, and thus work to revive the possibilities of a socialist feminist future.

**Synopses**

The first of the films that I consider within this chapter is Steven Soderbergh’s film *Erin Brockovich* (2000), a dramatisation of the true story of Erin Brockovich (Julia Roberts), a single mother who, in 1993, was part of the legal team that sued the Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) on behalf of the residents of Hinkley, a small Californian town. After forcefully gaining employment at attorney Ed Masry’s (Albert Finney) office, Erin discovers that the residents of Hinkley have been poisoned by PG&E’s use of hexavalent chromium, which has been leaking into the town’s water supplies and causing significant illnesses and diseases amongst the residents. The film follows Erin’s struggle to obtain justice for the residents of Hinkley, and culminates in, as the epilogue informs the audience, a settlement for the plaintiffs that “was the largest in a direct-action lawsuit in United States history.” It is important to acknowledge here that the film focuses predominantly on protagonist Erin, and her experiences of the Hinkley case; however, given that the case relies on collective, rather than individual, action to succeed, I contend that there is a socialist logic informing the film. Furthermore, while Erin is perhaps most obviously engaging in environmental activism, she is popularly understood as embodying identifiably feminist characteristics throughout the film, particularly through her fierce outspokenness, a trait which, as explored in the second chapter, emphatically links her to a tradition of feminist characters.

The second film I consider is Niki Caro’s *North Country*, which is loosely based on the landmark class action *Jenson vs. Eveleth Mines*, in which several female miners successfully filed the first ever sexual harassment class action suit against their
employers. Set in 1989, and released in 2005, the film follows the fictional Josey Aimes (Charlize Theron), who returns to her small Minnesotan mining hometown after leaving an abusive marriage, where she is employed by Pearson Mines, the town’s largest employer. Josey and the other female miners face sexual harassment at work, ranging from crass graffiti adorning the walls of the work areas, to having their change rooms smeared with faecal matter, to sexual assault. After several failed attempts to get the mine’s management to intervene and stop the harassment, Josey enlists the help of lawyer Bill White (Woody Harrelson) to launch a class action suit on behalf of all the female miners employed by Pearson’s, despite the fact that her female colleagues are initially unwilling to support the suit. The film is framed by the claim’s class certification trial, with flashbacks that cover both Josey’s experiences as a teenager and her experiences at the mine site acting as the “evidence” that ultimately proves Josey’s credibility as a witness. The end of the film sees Josey’s female colleagues finally join the class, and the film’s epilogue informs the audience that the complainants received both “a modest financial settlement” and a sexual harassment policy.

The final film investigated is Nigel Cole’s Made in Dagenham. Released in 2010, the film depicts the 1968 Ford Dagenham machinists’ strike, when 186 women machinists initially stopped work in order to protest their regrading as “unskilled” on a newly introduced pay scale, and then extended their industrial action to seek equal pay. Relying on upbeat music from the 1960s and colourful sixties fashions to create a bright and fun aesthetic, the film follows Rita O’Grady (Sally Hawkins) as she leads the Dagenham machinists to both regrading and, as the epilogue informs the audience, the Equal Pay Act of 1970. The film takes care to show the reality of being on strike for the women, as they are initially supported by their male colleagues, and then rejected when their industrial action temporarily shuts the factory down, thereby also rendering the men out of work. Through its depiction of Secretary of State Barbara Castle (Miranda Richardson), the film also shows how political, economic, and capitalist interests intersect in order to bring the strike to an end.

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23 A class action is explained by Bill White as “when a bunch of plaintiffs have the same issue, and they file a claim on behalf of a whole group, the class.” In order for the claim to go to trial, however, the class first needs to be certified by a judge; it is during the class certification trial that this film is set.
While the three films are linked through their focus on a female protagonist who rallies to a particular cause and engages in activism in order to force social change, the films’ differing aesthetics are noteworthy. As I have already observed, Made in Dagenham uses a particularly upbeat and ‘sixties’ aesthetic for its celebratory narrative; as Margaret Henderson has noted, it is a “highly stylish and stylised production in [its] staging of the past.”24 Similarly, Erin Brockovich, while less stylised than Made in Dagenham, also offers a celebratory narrative that contributes to the film’s overall upbeat feel. Indeed, it is the reliance on the celebratory narrative that makes these two films particularly postfeminist; as Jess Butler has argued, “celebratory narratives . . . are actively invoked as proof that feminism is no longer needed,”25 thus simultaneously celebrating a feminist past and foreclosing discussions of the continuing need for feminism in contemporary western society. Furthermore, as Elaine Roth has argued, Erin Brockovich

serves up the objectified erotic spectacle of Julia Roberts’ body, while reassuring the audience that Brockovich herself has orchestrated this display, rather than pandering to a male gaze (in response to complaints at work, she states, “I think I look nice.”)26

The display of the female body is also evident within Made in Dagenham, particularly through the ambitious Sandra who, in her quest to be “discovered” by modelling agents, wears hotpants to work. Thus, both Erin Brockovich and Made in Dagenham can be considered to have a “postfeminist” aesthetic particularly through a combination of a celebratory narrative and the sexualisation of key female characters within the films.

In contrast, North Country’s aesthetic is reminiscent of the “British kitchen-sink film tradition . . . [which] used realism to dramatise the alienation experienced by

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individuals living in a hostile environment.”

This sense of alienation is present throughout the film, particularly through sweeping shots that contrast the blue-tinged whiteness of the ever-present snow and the dark greys and blacks of the mine, a bleak palette that reflects the hostility Josey faces. In this way, the film appears to lack the postfeminist credentials required for appropriate comparison with *Erin Brockovich* and *Made in Dagenham*. However, it is through the casting of Charlize Theron as Josey Aimes that the film reveals its postfeminist sensibility. Indeed, reviewer Maria Garcia highlights these inconsistencies when she states, in her scathing review of the film,

Josey never ages. Although she spends her days cleaning viscous black stuff from the machinery at the mine, her skin sustains a spa-like glow. In fact, Theron’s face is probably misplaced here: She isn’t country enough.

In other words, even after being “made-under” for the role, Theron fulfils the postfeminist requirement to be “‘effortlessly beautiful’, [or] blessed with an attractive appearance but entirely unselfconscious about it.” Indeed, despite the film’s apparent distance from the makeover paradigm, Theron’s makeunder as Josey arguably still invokes its spectre; her “spa-like glow” as a mine worker gestures to the inevitable makeover and liberation of self that Theron will undergo once her character and filming commitments are completed. Thus despite their aesthetic differences, the films can all be considered as reflecting a postfeminist sensibility. Indeed, it is perhaps partly through their aesthetic differences that we can trace the competing and contradictory ideologies that characterise the postfeminist cultural context.

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30 Garcia, “North Country.”

It is also significant to note that the three films are “based on a true story,” in that they are fictional depictions of relatively recent historical events. Thomas Leitch has teased out the implications of such a label when he argues, [t]he phrase “based on a true story” . . . appeals to the authority of a master text that has all the authority of a precursor novel or play or story with none of their drawbacks. Not only does “a true story” have no authors or agents to be recompensed, but its authority can never be discredited.³²

In other words, the label “based on a true story” is strategically deployed to bestow symbolic historical authority on a text, thus fixing a particular depiction of an event as its “true and accurate” account. Such a label works to obscure the cultural influences that are mediating the production of these films; in this way, films that are “based on a true story” are not unlike the adaptations of classic literature which have been explored in the previous chapter. The film’s historical authority thus ensures that the prevailing cultural sensibilities of the context in which the film was produced – in this case, postfeminism – are easily naturalised within the historicised film.

The films *Erin Brockovich*, *North Country*, and *Made in Dagenham* engage with the ideals of socialist feminism in two main ways. Firstly, the films privilege, as did Ehrenreich in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, the anger of the protagonists, an anger that works to motivate Erin, Josey and Rita to fight for social change. Significantly, these expressions of anger are scaffolded by the careful depiction of each protagonist’s obviously gendered and classed material reality; such a strategy encourages the audience to sympathise with, and therefore approve of, the protagonists’ anger. Secondly, the films work to privilege collectivity, by depicting both the necessity of collective action for creating social change, and indeed the significance of anger in encouraging collective formations. Importantly, the films’ twin focus on anger and collectivity positions them as functioning together; as Sara Ahmed has compellingly argued, “emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments.”³³

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It is this relationship between anger and collectivity, between social and physical bodies, that forms the overarching frame for the following analysis.

**Socialist Feminist Anger on Film**

Clare Hemmings has argued that “it is this question of affect – misery, rage, passion, pleasure – that gives feminism its life,” and this is particularly true of *Made in Dagenham*, *Erin Brockovich* and *North Country*. Anger is not only depicted as a motivator within these films, but also sustains the protagonists through lengthy and emotionally draining personal, institutional, and legal battles. This prioritisation of anger within these postfeminist films is significant, given that, according to Diane Negra, the “affective hallmark of postfeminism is composure.” While composure is certainly a key characteristic of many postfeminist heroines, this is not true of the protagonists in the films that are the focus of this chapter; rather than remaining affectively “composed” in the face of discrimination or injustice, these women are rewarded for their expression of passion and anger. Importantly, this focus on emotion as a motivational tool is linked directly to the material realities of their status as working-class women, with the films taking care to depict their struggles and frustrations so that their anger becomes legitimate, understandable, and even inevitable. Indeed, the protagonists’ angry outbursts in each of the three films are both carefully contextualised and build on prior injustices in order to construct these emotions as justifiable responses to specific experiences of oppression, exploitation,

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and discrimination. Such contextualisation reflects Mary Holmes’ compelling assertion that “Western traditions of thought carry notions of the reasonableness of anger in certain situations; but what is ‘reasonable’ is always a production of power.”

This diegetic contextualisation functions in tandem with a postfeminist acceptance that gender discrimination and inequality is unpardonable, and the corresponding assumption that such discrimination is a historical relic of an unenlightened past that has been successfully resolved in a postfeminist society. In other words, the feminist anger in these socialist feminist films is depicted as reasonable because it is specifically directed at a social issue that is coded as historical.

Further, *Erin Brockovich, North Country* and *Made in Dagenham* also contribute to the construction of class as a problem of the past; in other words, class inequality, like gender inequality, is inferred to be a problem that no longer exists within a postfeminist cultural context. As Catherine Chaput has argued,

> [c]ultural representations that transform ongoing blue-collar life into the past tense of bygone historical eras prompt many audiences to mistakenly believe that these problems existed “back then” but not “today.”

The celebratory nature of the narratives thus forecloses any further discussion of the continuing exploitation of the working classes. In other words, because class inequality is constructed within these films as “historical” (and thus allegedly resolved within contemporary society), it is depicted as a legitimate reason for anger.

Because class and gender inequality are positioned as a problem of the past, Erin, Rita and Josey are able to avoid the “angry feminist” label, despite multiple angry outbursts throughout each film. The “trope of the angry feminist,” as articulated by Barbara Tomlinson, maintains that “feminists in general are angry, unreasoning, shrill, humourless, ugly, manhating, perverse, and peculiar.” The very labelling of a woman as an “angry feminist” serves to

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delegitimise feminist argument before the argument even begins, to undermine feminist politics by making its costs personal, and to foreclose feminist futures by making feminism seem repulsive to young women.  

And yet in these films the opposite appears to be occurring, as the films not only validate, but celebrate, these women and their “feminist” emotions. Indeed, it is the films’ depictions of positive outcomes – be it gaining Equal Pay legislation in the UK, gaining financial compensation for the poisoned victims of a greedy corporation, or gaining sexual harassment protection – that acts as the final justification for their anger. When taken together, the films suggest that feminist anger is “reasonable” when directed at a historical issue, and that feminist activism is successful when built upon a foundation of feminist anger.

**Negotiating Anger**

*Erin Brockovich* and *Made in Dagenham* are particularly noteworthy for the way they depict socialist feminist anger as a reasonable and productive response to stalled or failing institutional negotiations. Importantly, the anger depicted by the protagonists within these films is not a personal or individual anger; rather, it is indicative of a collective frustration at the failures of institutional policies to address the concerns of working-class people. In the case of *Erin Brockovich*, the anger depicted is an “anger for,” where Erin’s anger is focused on the plight of the Hinkley residents, rather than herself. This “anger for” has important consequences for both the way feminist anger functions within the film, as well as the way Erin herself is depicted. Indeed, of the three protagonists considered within this chapter, Erin is by far the most volatile, but her anger is made acceptable because it is on behalf of a vulnerable other; as Roth has argued, Erin’s “work on behalf of marginalised people excuses behaviour that might otherwise be considered traditionally masculine or transgressive for a woman to engage in.”

A key scene where Erin’s “anger for” is depicted as a productive response to a stalled negotiation occurs during a meeting in which a potential settlement offer is being discussed between PG&E’s lawyers, here represented by Sanchez and Walker, and Ed and Erin:

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41 Roth, “I Just Want to be a Decent Citizen,” 55.
SANCHEZ: Let’s be honest here. $20 million is more money than these people have ever dreamed of.

ERIN: See, now that pisses me off. First of all, since the demurrer, we have more than 400 plaintiffs and, let’s be honest, we all know there are more out there. They may not be the most sophisticated people, but they do know how to divide and twenty million dollars isn’t shit when you split it between them.

ED: Erin...

ERIN: Second of all, these people don’t dream about being rich. They dream about being able to watch their kids swim in a pool without worrying that they’ll have to have a hysterectomy at the age of 20. Like Rosa Diaz, a client of ours. Or have their spine deteriorate, like Stan Bloom, another client of ours. So before you come back here with another lame-ass offer, I want you to think real hard about what your spine is worth, Mr Walker. Or what you might expect someone to pay you for your uterus, Miss Sanchez. Then you take out your calculator and you multiply that number by 100. Anything less than that is a waste of our time. By the way, we had that water brought in special for you folks. Came from a well in Hinkley.

In this scene, Erin is clearly angry for her clients, both for the poor offer made and for the way that PG&E has assumed that because the residents are working-class, they can be easily bought off. Given that the film repeatedly depicts how being working-class impacts Erin’s life (there are several scenes, for example, portraying how financial instability impacts her diet), her anger arguably stems from a class-based empathy, and is as much a response to her own experiences of discrimination, as it is to PG&E’s treatment of the working-class plaintiffs. Erin’s anger, however, is tempered by her use of the logic and rationality demanded by legal discursive practices, which allows her to operate from a position of power within these legal proceedings. $20 million dollars divided by 400 plaintiffs is not a significant payout, especially when the medical needs of the plaintiffs are considered. Erin’s use of the medical histories of specific clients and her questioning of the lawyers’ sense of their own bodily worth also disrupts the abstraction of the negotiation, and recalibrates the discussion in terms of the human
cost of PG&E’s negligence. Thus, in Ahmed’s words, Erin’s anger “does things,”\textsuperscript{42} and her anger is coded as an effective response to dehumanising legal negotiations.

Anger is also depicted positively within \textit{Made in Dagenham} although, unlike in \textit{Erin Brockovich}, this anger is based on a shared sense of exploitation and discrimination between the protagonist and her peers. Throughout the film, the anger Rita shares with her colleagues works to position discrimination and exploitation as a collective issue; as Sharon Smith has persuasively argued, “for working-class women, there are no individual solutions to being overworked and underpaid.”\textsuperscript{43} One of the first depictions of Rita’s anger occurs towards the beginning of the film, when Rita and Connie accompany their Union Representatives, Albert and Monty, to an initial meeting with Ford’s manager, Peter Hopkins, to discuss the complaints of the machinists. At this point in the film, Rita and Connie have been instructed to remain quiet while the union officials speak on their behalf, but when Monty devises a plan to give Ford more time to consider their options in terms of the machinists’ grievance, Rita’s frustration at the process becomes acute:

\begin{quote}
MONTY: The girls’ll be fine, as long as they know they’re not being fobbed off by the management. The union’s setting the terms. That’s what’s important.

RITA: Bollocks. . . . I’m sorry, Albert, but it is. Three hours we’ve been sat here. “That’s what matters to the girls?” How you’re qualified to talk about that, I do not know.

. . .

HOPKINS: Mrs O’Grady, I understand your grievance –

RITA: Oh, I really don’t think you do. It’s not difficult, though. We’re entitled to semi-skilled, and the wages what go with it.

HOPKINS: Why don’t you bring this to the meeting –

RITA: Hang on, I haven’t finished. And as regards to this queue-jumping business, well, we put this complaint in months ago, didn’t we? It’s just you’ve done nothing about it. And we all know why. That’s ‘cause women have never been on strike before, isn’t it? You just thought you could forget it and we’d all go away. Well, I’m sorry,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 119.
\textsuperscript{43} Smith, \textit{Women and Socialism}, 109.
but it isn’t going to be that easy, because we’re not going anywhere. We’re gonna do what we said we would. No more overtime and an immediate 24-hour stoppage. And where it goes from there, well, it’s up to you. If you’ll excuse me, I’ve really got to be going. Thank you very much.

Here, as in *Erin Brockovich*, anger is coded as a disruptive, but ultimately productive, emotional and logical response to discrimination and inequality. Just as Erin drew attention to the ways that the settlement is not enough for the number of plaintiffs, Rita makes clear that the Dagenham machinists have followed Ford’s own protocols for registering their dissatisfaction with the new pay-scale. Given that Ford have not executed their responsibility to hear this complaint in a timely manner, and are happy to delay the process again, the only option left for the Dagenham collective to ensure their rights as workers are being met is to take strike action.

Unlike the negotiation scene in *Erin Brockovich* which prioritises discourses of class conflict, this exchange is emblematic of Negra and Tasker’s compelling argument that within a “recessionary discursive environment . . . class tensions are consistently processed as gender conflict.” This difference is attributable to the fact that while *Erin Brockovich* was released in 2000, *Made in Dagenham* was released ten years later in the recession-based aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-2009, as covered in Chapter Two. The discourses of gender inequality that are central to Rita’s anger are first established through the framing of the scene. Unlike Erin, who is faced with a female adversary in Sanchez, Rita and Connie are outnumbered five men to two women in their meeting and, perhaps more importantly, are positioned on the far left of the table, away from Monty, the key negotiator. This positioning indicates the gendered power dynamics of the scene more broadly as, until Rita interjects, the meeting is handled by Monty and Peter; indeed, prior to the meeting’s commencement, Monty instructs Rita and Connie to “keep [their] head down,” even if they are asked a direct question. This physical sidelining of Rita and Connie, along with Monty’s instructions to let him speak on their behalf, indicates the film’s evocation of discourses of gendered inequality, and justifies Rita’s anger.

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Rita makes explicit this mobilisation of gendered inequality when she challenges Monty’s “mansplaining” of the collective’s priorities. A concept identified by Rebecca Solnit in her collection of essays, *Men Explain Things To Me*, and subsequently integrated into the popular lexicon, mansplaining is when “[m]en explain things to . . . women, whether or not they know what they’re talking about.” While Monty may not be in direct conversation with Rita alone, she is certainly a part of the conversation, and his opinion that the women he is paid to represent will not be bothered by the delay of the hearing of their complaint “as long as they know they’re not being fobbed off by management” is a strategic revision of the women’s priorities in line with his desire to maintain a positive relationship with Ford. It is during Monty’s mansplaining that Rita’s anger finally peaks, and she interrupts the negotiation to put forth the women’s actual priorities and concerns. With a curt “how you’re qualified to talk about that, I do not know,” Rita denies Monty’s authority as a spokesman for the Dagenham machinists, thus evoking a history of feminists “speaking up and talking back,” as explored in chapter two. Rita further emphasises the primacy of gender conflict in this negotiation when she asserts that the real reason for Ford’s refusal to address their complaint is “because women have never been on strike.” Rita’s anger thus explicitly exposes the failures of both the unions and employers to be accountable to their female workers, and foregrounds discourses of gender inequality for making meaning in this scene.

Significantly, the justifications for both Erin’s and Rita’s anger are provided in earlier scenes in their respective films, in which it is made clear that gender and class position are often used against working-class women as “proof” of their alleged moral failings. Erin, for example, is accused of using a doctor as a “meal-ticket” when she sue[s] him for damages after he injures her in a car accident. The defence attorney strategically uses Erin’s financial debt and multiple marriages to discredit her testimony, painting her as “desperate . . . [and] out of control.” Given that Erin is a single, working-class mother, her failed marriages and financial debt are drawn upon as “evidence” of her moral failings, especially when compared to an emergency-room

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doctor, who not only saves lives, but acts as an ideal consumer within a capitalist society, seen through his ownership of a Jaguar.

Rita’s gender and class position is similarly used against her in *Made in Dagenham*, when the location of her home is used as “confirmation” of her inability to prepare her son for a middle-class world. This discrimination occurs when Rita challenges Mr Clarke, her son’s maths teacher, on his use of corporal punishment, and Clarke both dismisses her concerns and holds her responsible for her son’s alleged failings. Indeed, he patronisingly informs her that the academic difficulties that “boys . . . from the estate” have are not really their fault, but rather the fault of the parents, who have “invariably never undergone the full rigour of academic life.” Here, Rita’s presumed lack of education is proffered as the underlying reason for her son’s repeated physical punishment. Given that Clarke is representative of a middle-class school, this exchange indicates the ways that, as Beverley Skeggs has argued, “class is marked . . . through drawing boundaries around certain practices and knowledge, in order that only some people can be seen to comfortably make use of them.” In other words, Rita’s treatment in this scene makes clear the ways that the benefits of middle-class institutions, such as schools or courtrooms, are often inaccessible to working-class women and their families. As a result, the anger expressed by both Rita and Erin in their respective negotiations is coded as a positive and necessary step in the revitalisation of the social order, and an important intervention into stagnant institutional approaches to working-class women.

**Anger Within**

In contrast, the anger expressed by Josie Aimes in *North Country* occurs within a social space, rather than an institutional one, and indicates a more personal, individual anger primarily expressed through body language and visual cues, rather than the persuasive verbal expression displayed by Rita and Erin. In this way, Josey’s anger works to show, rather than tell, the audience of the persistent discrimination faced by (historical) working-class women. Take, for example, the scene that takes place at Josey’s son Sammy’s hockey game. While sitting in the stands with Bill, Josey is loudly called a “mining whore” by the wife of Bobby Sharpe, one of the main proponents of

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sexual harassment at the mine site. Sammy, who is embarrassed and angry after hearing his mother accused of “tossing her ass around,” decides to stay the night at his girlfriend Stacey’s house. When informed of this by Stacey, Josey’s rage and frustration at the unfair and discriminatory way she is being treated, both on and off the mine site, manifests as an ugly scene in front of all of Sammy’s teammates, their parents, Josey’s parents, and Josey’s friends, Glory and Kyle. While the other analyses in this thesis quote and investigate the dialogue within particular scenes, simply reproducing the dialogue of this incident does little to convey the tension and heightened emotion that frames the scene. Given that the scene’s power is as much in its action as its dialogue, sketching the action alongside the dialogue is necessary to draw out exactly what is happening in the scene.

When Stacey tells Josey Sammy is staying at her house tonight, Josey stalks over to Stacey’s mother’s car, and demands that Sammy “get out of the car now.” Stacey’s mother interjects with “He’s very upset, maybe –,” but Josey, increasingly upset, continues to yell at Sammy to get out of the car. Faced with his repeated refusals, Josey physically drags him out of the car, dropping him on the ground in the process. In response, an infuriated Sammy yells “you’re a whore, just like everyone said!” When he calls her a whore, Josey’s anger shifts into rage, and she reacts by slapping at Sammy’s arms and head, and screaming “Don’t you ever talk to me like that!” Once Sammy finally gets into the truck, Josey turns to her young daughter, Karen, and yells at her to get in the truck. Karen, terrified by the yelling, does not move quickly enough, and Josey lunges at her, chasing her into the truck. Once both children are in the vehicle, Josey turns to the gathered crowd and desperately yells, “you want a show, huh? Is that what you want? You can all go to hell!”

Within this scene, there is thus an uncontrolled intensity in Josey’s expression of emotion that epitomises the differences between anger and rage, where anger is “a strong feeling of annoyance, displeasure or hostility,” and rage is defined as a “violent uncontrollable anger.” This lack of control distinguishes Josey’s emotions from Rita and Erin; while they are both angry, neither Rita nor Erin lose control, and thus they are able to intervene in the negotiations in ways that are productive. In

contrast, the violence of Josey’s emotions alienates her children (briefly), her friends, and her parents, and emphasises the isolation that increasingly suffocates her. Indeed, it is a frantic, emotionally-charged scene that makes clear that Josey’s personal life, as well as her work life, is spinning out of control.

While Josey’s physical abuse of her son and scaring of her daughter may be coded as proof of failed motherhood, the fact that the film’s audience has witnessed the poor treatment she has constantly faced from both her father and her male colleagues means that a dominant reading of this scene constructs Josey’s anger as understandable. Reading this particular scene as a manifestation of Josey’s rage at all of the injustices she has faced – including, but not limited to, an invasive vaginal exam to qualify for the job and sexual and physical intimidation by her male colleagues – reflects Holmes’ argument that anger is “part of a politics of struggle that takes place in/between and through space/time and bodies.” Indeed, as depicted within this scene, Josey’s difficulties at the mine bleed into her personal life, showing how anger and rage cross the boundaries between work space/time, and personal space/time. In fact, it is in the spaces between Josey’s work and home life – in this case, at the local public hockey rink – where her rage spills out, impacting not only her body but the bodies of her children, and resulting in her anger being witnessed as a public spectacle.

The fact that Josey’s anger quickly becomes rage has important ramifications for the way emotion functions as a driver of the narrative. Unlike Erin and Rita, whose anger is immediately productive and strengthens social bonds, Josey’s rage exacerbates her social isolation. Significantly, however, Josey’s rage gives way to a sense of outrage, and a refusal to allow the discrimination and harassment she faces to continue. The differences between Josey’s rage and her outrage are essential to her later political effectiveness; as Claire Kahane explains, “[t]he experience of rage is powerful, but not political,” while “outrage by its very nature is a force for change.” While Josey’s experience of rage is a powerful moment in the film, it is arguably the outrage that follows the rage that works to, as Holmes has argued, “disrupt social interaction and . . . threaten[s] current power relations,” as it is directly tied to

51 Holmes, “Feeling Beyond Rules,” 211.
53 Holmes, “Feeling Beyond Rules,” 211.
Josey’s adoption of a more proactive socialist action. Indeed, at the end of the scene, as Josey is sobbing in her car, there is a voice-over of her colleague Peg saying “after that, she kind of lost it.” The scene then transitions back to the court case, where Peg is being examined by the opposing counsel in Josey’s class certification trial:

   LAWYER: When you say “Lost it”?  
   PEG: Well, ranting all the time about how we shouldn’t take it anymore, how the company wasn’t protecting us, the union wasn’t protecting us.  
   LAWYER: What did she think you needed protection from?  
   PEG: Don’t know.

That the audience never sees Josey “ranting” or outraged after the scene outside the hockey rink is noteworthy; while she briefly discusses sexual harassment with the women at a make-up party, it is a discussion fuelled by passion, rather than rage or anger. No longer willing to keep her head down, Josey has been reinvigorated with a clarity of purpose in the wake of her public breakdown, as she attempts to organise the women to fight against their institutionally-sanctioned sexual harassment. Indeed, the fact that the breakdown scene ends with Josey sobbing in her car perhaps indicates a cathartic expulsion of the personal stresses and sense of helplessness that has been enforced by her workplace, thus fortifying her for the fight ahead. Having lost her sense of social security, Josey now has nothing more to lose, and everything to gain, hence her renewed determination to fight against sexual harassment in her workplace. The film thus relies heavily on the depiction of Josey’s rage as, to again borrow Ahmed’s idea, “doing something”\(^{54}\); her very public outburst triggers an escalation of her socialist action, and is thus constructed as a necessary progression in her journey, albeit at great personal expense.

**Anger as Situational**

An important caveat to the ways that these films construct feminist anger as positive, and even as a necessary tool for social change, is that each of the films ends with the protagonist no longer angry, at least not at the specific event that originally incited her anger. *Made in Dagenham*, for example, ends with all of the machinists,

\(^{54}\text{Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 119.}\)
and their male co-workers, cheerfully riding their bikes back to the Ford factory, while *North Country* ends with Josey laughing with Sammy as she teaches him to drive. *Erin Brockovich* ends slightly differently, with Erin being awarded a $2 million bonus from her boss Ed, thus freeing her from her financial stressors, and the continuation of their work advocating for other disadvantaged communities. In other words, the anger of each of the working-class women is specific to the way a particular grievance intersects with their position as “working-class” and, once the legislation is passed, the decision made, or the financial pressures alleviated, their anger and their feminist activism can be forgotten. While the characters are depicted as needing their anger to achieve social change, it is arguably just as significant that this anger is discarded at the end of each film. It is perhaps through this “letting go” of both their anger and the feminist politics that this anger spawned, that the characters evade being labelled as “angry feminists.” Anger thus plays a significant role within each of these films. Relying on prior scenes of discrimination in order to justify anger as a response, these films code historical and situational anger as the basis of productive feminist interventions into stagnant patriarchal processes and institutions. Angry women, according to the logic of these films, were a necessary prerequisite for the achievement of social equality in contemporary postfeminist society, in which angry women are no longer tolerable.

**Self vs. Collective**

While the expression of “legitimate” anger is clearly central to these films, and indeed to the execution of successful action, anger alone is not enough. The protagonists rely heavily on their anger to “align individuals with [their] community.”55 Indeed, the formation of collectives is central to each of the films. This is not to say that the formation of a collective is easy, or without struggle; indeed, it is the struggle between maintaining one’s individualism and the merging of one’s interests with others that makes the films so engaging. Importantly, this struggle between individualism and collectivity occurs in tandem with the films’ careful depiction of the everyday material realities of the protagonists; there is a sense of inevitability to the women’s choice to engage in socialist action. Hartsock outlines this key relationship between material realities and social activism, when she argues that

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“[t]he focus on everyday life and experience makes action a necessity, not a moral choice or an option. We are not fighting other people’s battles but our own.”\textsuperscript{56} It is this focus on “our battles,” and the necessary unification of the collective that functions as a central plot point within both \textit{Erin Brockovich} and \textit{North Country}, as both Erin and Josey try to gather solidarity for their cause. In contrast, \textit{Made in Dagenham} introduces the audience to the Dagenham Ford factory’s machinists as an already unified collective. While such a recognition of the positive nature of collectivity and solidarity may seem in tension with neoliberal and postfeminist commitments to individualism,\textsuperscript{57} the films’ use of collectivity and solidarity work in very specific ways to adhere to postfeminist ideologies, an idea to which I will return. Firstly, however, I argue that by tracing the films’ treatment of notions of collectivity and solidarity chronologically, it becomes evident how popular culture texts act as a visible site where discourses of individualism are under increasing critique.

Released over a decade, these three films produce a useful chronology of how we might understand popular neoliberal individualism. The earliest of the films, \textit{Erin Brockovich}, demonstrates the most individualist mindset of all the films. Erin does require solidarity and effective collectivity for their legal win and this is never clearer than when Ed and Erin are trying to get 90% of the complainants to agree to binding arbitration\textsuperscript{58} rather than a trial; however, while Erin acts as an approachable liaison between the residents of Hinkley and the lawyers representing their case, she is not a resident and thus remains an outsider to their collective action. Although she does make significant personal sacrifices in order to bring the case about – for example, she misses her youngest daughter’s first word – she is not, and will never be, one of the residents whose health is deteriorating because of PG&E’s actions. Erin is thus able to champion the cause of the collective, without being vulnerable in a way that collective membership requires. In other words, while Erin’s success is underpinned by socialist


\textsuperscript{58} Binding arbitration is when a judge determines how much, if any, financial compensation each plaintiff is entitled to. Unlike a trial, there is no appeal process and the judge’s ruling is final.
ideas of collectivism and solidarity, these socialist ideals are ultimately refracted through the film’s individualist framework.

Erin’s outsider status is demonstrated most clearly through her interactions with Pamela Duncan, one of Hinkley’s more “difficult” residents. A particularly salient example is when, after Erin seeks to interview her and establish her interest in joining the case, Pamela says “Oh, you people don’t give a shit. Anything to get what you want.” By addressing Erin as “you people,” Pamela clearly establishes Erin as an outsider who is prioritising her own wants over those of the residents of Hinkley, despite the fact that many of the residents specifically seek out Erin for her help. Despite her initial reservations, however, Pamela later joins the collective, but reveals the vulnerability she feels in prioritising the collective’s needs over her own when she states, “I don’t wanna feel it all over again, and then not have it come out right. I don’t know if I could handle that. Put the kids through that.” Here, Pamela articulates the stressors of competing loyalties within collective social action; the benefits to the community must always be weighed against the risks to the family’s well-being. This point of view, however, is easily dismissed within the context of the narrative, as Pamela, after hearing that the complainants would be going to binding arbitration instead of to trial, refuses to answer Erin’s calls, and accuses the lawyers of lying to the complainants. Given that Erin is the heroine of the film, Pamela’s actions can be reabsorbed into the narrative as “obstacles” for Erin to individually overcome, thereby sidelining the tension between collectivity and individualism that Pamela is struggling with. Yet, the fact that this sub-plot is included in the narrative suggests that within the film there is an undercurrent of grappling with the individual’s versus the collective’s needs.

This undercurrent is explored more broadly in *North Country*, where the female miners choose to prioritise their individual needs over those of any potential collective for most of the film. In contrast to Erin, Josey is one of the victims, and shares workplace-specific experiences with the other miners. Yet her struggle to unify the other women miners is difficult, as the women want to protect their own interests as individuals, rather than risking personal vulnerability through joining the class action.

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suit. One example of this can be seen when Josey attempts to recruit her young colleague Sherry to join the suit:

SHERRY: You think I don’t wanna stick it up their asses?
JOSEY: Then why don’t you do it?
SHERRY: And what if we lost? And I had to go back to that mine every day and face those sons of bitches. No way. Who else you got so far? It’d just be you and me? Are you crazy? You know what they did to me. No way, man. I got my own problems.

At the end of this exchange, Sherry gets up from the table and goes to comfort her mother. It is evident that Sherry’s mother relies on her for care of some description, and so Sherry needs to weigh up the costs and benefits of joining the class; not only for herself, but for her mother too. Sherry also addresses a significant issue when it comes to individualism and collectivity: if the collective fails, it will be the women as individuals who will suffer for their actions.

It is not until the end of the trial – and towards the very end of the film – that Josey’s efforts to form her collective finally succeed, which results in her class being certified. In an emotional scene, an almost-paralysed Glory is wheeled into the courtroom by her husband Kyle, who then reads a brief note on her behalf: “My name is Glory Dodge, and I’m not fucking dead yet. I stand with Josey.” Glory then stares intently at Sherry and the other women, compelling them to also metaphorically “stand with Josey,” by becoming plaintiffs in her class action. While Chaput has argued that it is not until after Bobby admits to seeing Josey raped as a student by her teacher, that Josey “transforms from a promiscuous and therefore unreliable witness to an innocent victim [and] her once-reluctant female co-workers join the suit,” I argue that it is also Glory’s involvement that allows the collective to form. Indeed, it is Glory’s former position as a union representative, and her experience in looking after her female colleagues’ interests, that marks her as an unofficial leader, and it is her decision to join the collective that encourages the other miners to follow her lead. Simultaneously, however, the fact that it is Glory who starts the domino effect of support for the suit undermines the tensions between individualism and collectivity that have structured the entire movie, because Glory, like Josey, no longer works at

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60 Chaput, “Striking Women,” 43.
the mine (in Glory’s case it is due to her terminal illness), and therefore need fear no retribution from her male co-workers. In this way, the film can be seen as sidestepping the difficulty of making the decision to prioritise the collective over the self; neither Glory nor Josey have anything more to lose (the film does not suggest that joining the class would have adverse effects on Glory’s already failing health, and Josey has already quit her job).

Despite this sidestepping of the difficulty of making the decision to prioritise the collective over the self, however, the film does take further the ideas addressed in Erin Brockovich. Indeed, because joining a collective requires the sidelining of the needs of the individual, it is the individual who will have to deal with the consequences, and so the individual needs to decide if the risk is worth the reward. Through engaging more overtly with such ideas, we can see that within the film (and arguably within western society at large) there is a more significant acknowledgment of the importance of acting as a collective to achieve social change, as well as a simultaneous grappling with the ideas of individuality, risk, and reward as justification for prioritising the collective.

In Made in Dagenham, however, the collective is formed before the narrative begins; the machinists have not only banded together, but they have already begun industrial action in the form of a complaint to management about their being regraded to “unskilled” on a newly-implemented pay scale. Indeed, within the first scene of the women in the factory, the collective of women workers is informed that the deadline they have set for the management to respond to their complaint has now passed, and that they have to vote as to whether they will refuse to work overtime and engage in a one-day work stoppage. By starting the film with the women as an already-formed collective, the film is arguably bypassing the tensions between collectivity and individuality that plagued Josey’s social action in North Country. This is a decidedly positive depiction of collectivity and solidarity, and the friendship and support that the women offer each other throughout the film reflects the sentiments evident within feminist memoirs that reflect on the 1960s. Activist Amy Kesselman, for example, has remembered that “[f]riendships in the early years of women’s liberation were different. They reinforced our strengths, not our weaknesses,”61 while founding member of New York Radical Women, Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall, has expressed,

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[w]hat I’d like to convey . . . is the joy we felt. We were, we believed, poised on the trembling edge of a transformation. All the walls and boundaries inside and outside us might be knocked down.  

Similarly, once the Dagenham machinists have made the decision to strike, they speak with joy and pride in terms of the unified collective, saying things like “We did it,” “I feel quite proud of us” and “Every other bugger around here goes on strike, why shouldn’t we?” [all italics added]. This positive dialogue, when combined with the colourful aesthetic of the film, effectively depicts the sense of joy articulated within feminist memoirs of the 1960s and 1970s. An important caveat, however, is that memoirs such as Baxandall’s and Kesselman’s were those of middle-class feminists; indeed, the notion of “sisterhood” was arguably most compelling for middle-class women who felt isolated from their peers. In contrast, working-class women have often had significant relationships with other women through their work. The extent to which the “sisterhood” of the Dagenham workers is refracted through middle-class sentiments and fantasies is thus an idea to which I shall return.  

While Made in Dagenham focuses on an already formed collective, a collective that has seemingly chosen to elevate the needs of the group over those of the individual, there is a key scene, between Rita and her younger colleague Sandra, which briefly canvasses the difficulty of juggling the collective’s needs and the individual’s. At this point in the film, it has been established that Sandra desperately wants to be a model. She talks often about being scouted by a modelling agency, and even wears hot pants to work to be “noticed.” It is Sandra’s desire to be a model that causes the company to identify her as a means through which to break the strike: they offer her a deal wherein if she returns to work (thereby weakening the collective’s bargaining power), she will be hired as the model featured in the publicity for one of the company’s new models of car. Once Rita is informed that Sandra is back at the factory, she goes to meet Sandra, and the following exchange takes place:

SANDRA: This is something I’ve always wanted.
RITA: I know.

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SANDRA: I mean, I don’t even know if I really care about equal pay. I mean, it’s still a shitty factory. And this is just a brochure, but, you know – It’s only trade, but it’ll lead on. Get my foot in the door, you know? I just – I just don’t want to let you down. I just –

RITA: You haven’t let us down. You haven’t gone back to work, have you? ‘Cause that’s the deal here, isn’t it? They set up this shoot, and you go back to work? Only you haven’t gone back to work, have you?

So –

SANDRA: Yeah, but if they don’t use these photos, unless I –

RITA: Oh, Sandra. Look at you. You are a model. You’re a natural. They couldn’t get better. You could, though.

As a result of this exchange, in which Rita suggests that Sandra can find better work than the tainted deal that Ford is offering her, Sandra returns to the shoot and, as she disrobes, it is revealed that she has written “Equal Pay” across her stomach in red lipstick, thereby sending an emphatic message to Ford management that the collective will not be weakened. It is important to note that Rita encourages Sandra to privilege the needs of the collective through appealing to Sandra’s sense of individualism: she says “they couldn’t get better. You could, though.” She therefore ties Sandra’s improved prospects as an individual to the success of the collective. Indeed, this scene can be understood as representative of the film’s attitude to collectivity as a whole: if the needs of the collective are met, then the needs of the individual are also improved.

Sisterhood and Middle-Classness

Yet while collectivity, and particularly sisterhood, are valorised within this film, it is important to acknowledge that this depiction of sisterhood is one that can succeed only because it is firmly located in the past. Indeed, the notion of sisterhood has become increasingly problematic within contemporary society; as Brenda Lyshaug has explained,

[w]hile the second-wave appeal to ‘sisterhood’ forged widespread unity, it did so by attributing a set of common interests to women – interests shaped by an allegedly shared experience of oppression – and it thereby suppressed, as is now widely acknowledged, the distinctive experiences and perspectives of working-class women,
lesbians, and women of color. It also enabled white middle-class women to ignore their own complicity in race- and class-based oppression.63

These divisive consequences of middle-class notions of “sisterhood” are especially significant given that each of the films within this chapter profess a positive socialist feminist sensibility. Made in Dagenham, particularly, can be read as middle-class nostalgia for a sense of solidarity that was, as Rachel Blau Du Plessis and Ann Snitow have argued, “a fantasy, a metaphor, a fiction.”64 This is particularly evident in an exchange between working-class Rita and middle-class Lisa Hopkins, the wife of Ford Dagenham’s manager. At this point in the film, Rita has just returned from the funeral of Connie’s husband, George. Rita is emotionally drained after having been accused of being glad that George is dead, and Lisa, who Rita has so far only briefly engaged with, visits Rita at home to tell her that their petition to have Mr Clarke fired has been successful. It is only then that Lisa properly introduces herself, and informs Rita that her husband is Peter Hopkins, the senior manager at Ford who Rita previously met with. The rest of Lisa’s explanation is as follows:

LISA: I’m Lisa Burnett, I’m 31 years old, and I have a first class honours degree from one of the finest universities in the world, and my husband treats me like I’m a fool. And when I was studying for my degree, I was very, very happy. And mostly because of the work. Because I loved reading about all these extraordinary people making history. And – And I just wondered what it felt like? So let me know, will you? When you finish doing it?

RITA: I don’t know.

LISA: Don’t give up. Don’t let me down.

Lisa is clearly unhappy in her own life, and yet she constructs activism (or “history”) as the domain of the working classes. Indeed, she specifically places the responsibility for

change on Rita’s shoulders; despite Lisa’s vast resources, both financial and social, it is up to Rita to make history. Furthermore, when Lisa states “Don’t let me down,” she is also implying that this is something Rita can do for Lisa. She can make history more interesting for her detached, middle-class “sister,” who will watch on as a spectator, rather than an actor; perhaps not unlike the presumed postfeminist audience of the film, which is, according to Tasker and Negra, “white and middle-class by default.”

Importantly, the presence of Lisa makes more obvious the way the film aestheticises the “radical chic that is sometimes ascribed to working-class roots.” In other words, working-class identity is celebrated and romanticised by Lisa, and the film more generally, for its sense of grittiness, or authenticity, that only comes through struggle. It is this construction of class in particular that lends credence to the interpretation of this film, as a fantasy for “ideal” postfeminists (who are, as I mentioned previously, conceptualised as white and middle-class). As an identificatory figure for the postfeminist audience, Lisa dramatises support for feminist activism without risking anything herself (for example, a stable income, housing, or social relationships). The lack of personal risk faced by Lisa epitomises Elspeth Probyn’s compelling argument that, by viewing from afar Rita’s suffering, Lisa is able to access a “glimpse of pain and thereby gain a certain sense of empathy, without, of course, having to endure the conditions that produce pain.” In other words, the class separation between Lisa and Rita allows Lisa to experience a historically-significant struggle vicariously, to draw on the sense of accomplishment without accepting the concomitant risks that the Dagenham collective took by going on strike.

Lisa’s middle-class support for the continuation of the Dagenham machinists’ collective action might also be read as indicating a white middle-class feminist nostalgia for a return to an unproblematic form of sisterhood and activism. Mariana Ortega, for example, makes explicit the internal conflict within the women’s movement, when she articulates how the plurality of feminist voices within the movement means that white middle-class feminists are repeatedly encouraged to confront their privilege, to be “reminded of the fact that [they] ha[ve] privileges in the

65 Tasker and Negra, “Introduction,” 2.
racist system that [they] inhabit, privileges that [they] loathe, but that [they] doesn’t want to lose.”  Given these internal conflicts, historicised films such as *Made in Dagenham* arguably present a voice of singularity that allows a brief respite from such tension, glossing over contemporary debates about exclusion and privilege in favour of a nostalgic presentation of a unified feminism. Lisa thus facilitates remembrance of apparently unified past, where feminism was particularly dynamic and vibrant because of all the working-class women (like Rita) who, through their anger and formation of collectives, made it that way.

It is for such reasons that I argue that Lisa’s perspective is more indicative of a postfeminist sensibility than a historical one, as she serves to foreclose the revolutionary potential of the middle classes. By locating the possibilities of revolution or activism within one particular historicised (and, by postfeminist logic, no longer existent) class, the film works to depict a postfeminist belief that feminism, much like class, is “a phenomenon of the past.” The postfeminist sensibility of each of these films is further evidenced through their depictions of landmark cases: that the cases were successful, and thus led to either significant legislative changes or increased awareness of corporate irresponsibility, suggests that feminist activism can be considered “completed,” and therefore redundant in contemporary society.

Seventies’ Feminism

This postfeminist notion of feminist activism as “redundant” is further supported through the films’ status as “based on true stories,” and the ways that such adaptations of real events often, in the words of Leitch, “invite admiration rather than emulation.” After all, how can emulation of activism occur if, as the films suggest, feminist activism has already resolved gender inequalities? The simultaneous celebration of feminist history, and disavowal of its continued relevance that is central


70 Tasker and Negra, “Introduction,” 8.


72 Leitch, *Film Adaptation and its Discontents*, 286.
to these films is achieved predominantly through portraying a specific and narrow field of actions as “feminist activism.” According to the logic of these films, feminist activism is a response to institutional, rather than cultural, discrimination, and involves striking, filing lawsuits, and organising those within your immediate vicinity to act as a catalyst for significant social change. The repeated staging of such autonomous, rather than institutional, actions as indicative of a feminist sensibility reflects Jonathon Dean’s argument that “a particular reading of autonomous ‘seventies’ feminism [is understood] as the paradigm of feminism per se.” In other words, the public and “in your face” style of activism that characterised the 1970s is popularly deployed as the framework through which all feminist activism is measured.

It is noteworthy that each of the three films can be read through this lens of seventies feminism, given that none of the films explored within this chapter were actually set in the 1970s. Instead, the films are based in the 1960s (Made in Dagenham), the 1980s (North Country), and the 1990s (Erin Brockovich). The flexibility of this schema to successfully frame and explain these temporally diverse films demonstrates that notions of seventies feminism do not actually rely on depictions of the social and political context of the 1970s to make meaning, but are rather deployed as a shorthand to mark feminist activism as historical. Indeed, the concept of the “seventies” paradigm of feminist activism, not unlike the postfeminist historical women’s film, relies on the notion that the present is temporally distinct from the past, rather than a continuation of concerns that are yet to be resolved.

This careful distinction between past and present is particularly visible through the epilogues presented at the end of North Country and Made in Dagenham. Made in Dagenham, for example, finishes with the following text:

Two years later in May 1970 the Equal Pay Act became law. Similar legislation quickly followed in most industrial countries across the world.

The credits are then interspersed with footage from the actual strike, and recent interviews with the Dagenham machinists. Similarly, North Country ends with the following information:

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73 Jonathon Dean, Rethinking Contemporary Feminist Politics (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 12.
The real women of the Mesabi Iron Range won their case in court. They received a modest financial settlement, but more importantly, they got the one thing that management didn’t want to give – a sexual harassment policy that would protect them and all the women who came after them. This film is dedicated to the women who fought this case, to their courage and dignity, and to a landmark victory that began in the North Country and resonated around the world.

The language used in both of these epilogues is significant, as it suggests that globally, women’s equality is now assured. *North Country*, in particular, is buoyant in its language; by calling the case a “landmark victory that began in the North Country and resonated around the world,” the implication is that women all around the world have also achieved the victory of sexual harassment legislation. There is a sense of optimism in both of these epilogues, whereby a chapter of women’s history, tainted by institutionally sanctioned discrimination, can now be closed. This is despite the fact that all around the world, women continue to be sexually harassed, paid less than their male colleagues, and treated unequally in both the public and private spheres. These epilogues thus demonstrate that when an assumption of separation between past and present is transposed onto the history of the feminist movement, the postfeminist assertion that gender equality has been achieved is broadly facilitated.

Despite this general assumption of gender equality that circulates within postfeminist cultural context, there is increasing evidence to suggest that feminist activism is on the rise, and taking new forms. While Debi Roker has argued in her four studies that consider young women’s engagement with social activism, “there [is] a high level of engagement by young women in a range of ‘action’: volunteering, campaigning, promoting change, challenging discrimination and disadvantage,”74 digital platforms and online cultures are also providing new spaces for feminist ideas, priorities, and new forms of feminist socialist activism to emerge. The practice of blogging, for example, is one that is increasingly examined as a new form of feminist activism. Jessalynn Marie Keller, in her exploration of blogs The FBomb and The Seventeen Magazine Project, has argued that “girl feminist bloggers are reframing

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what it means to be a feminist activist” by “articulating an online feminist community that not only consists of a range of networks and connections, but also a diversity of voices, goals and interests.” Rather than undertaking feminist activism by traditional collective action, online communities are being built, connections are being forged, and experiences are being shared. Importantly, such community-building is not unlike the consciousness-raising groups of the late 1960s and 1970s; these online spaces provide a platform for young women to discuss their experiences, often “mak[ing] visible the pervasive structural inequality of women.” Furthermore, blogs and online spaces can also function as a space for education; as Carrie A. Rentschler argues, “online sites can serve as a key source of feminist education and activist terminology beyond the classroom.” In this way, online activism may offer a particularly effective way of spreading feminist activist terminology (such as “rape culture”) and ideas, in a way that is palatable to a technologically-savvy generation. While accusations of “slacktivism” or a lack of “outcomes” for online activism abound, Julia Schuster is careful to note that the young New Zealand women she interviewed for her study “did not confine themselves to [online] discussions alone; they also used social media to organise events outside the internet.”

The prevalence of online activism indicates how the label of “feminist activism” is no longer restricted to “traditional” forms of activism, but to increasingly diverse actions. Indeed, while it may not mirror the “traditional” activism lauded by films like Made in Dagenham and North Country, activism nevertheless occurs, and is increasingly visible. Indeed, Dean, and also Linda Beail and Lilly J. Goren, have both

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77 Baer, “Redoing Feminism,” 28. See also: Harris, “Young Women, Late Modern Politics,” 482-483.
79 See: Harris, “Young Women, Late Modern Politics,” 486.
identified 2008 as the year in which “an intensification of discourse about feminism” occurred, both in the UK and the US respectively. Given that North Country and Made in Dagenham were produced in a cultural context in which feminist visibility is increasing, it is perhaps not too farfetched to suggest that the ideas of socialist feminism are slowly becoming not only familiar within mainstream popular culture, but palatable and even desirable.

**Conclusion**

Through their depictions of the material realities of their respective protagonists, their expression of anger and solidarity, and their specific engagements with depictions of the working class and activism, the films Erin Brockovich, North Country, and Made in Dagenham engage with a socialist feminist sensibility. Revisiting the importance of collectives in achieving social change within popular culture is perhaps an indication that socialist ideas are again gaining traction within contemporary Western society, and perhaps have more social currency than in the recent past, especially considering the economic climate that places increasing pressure on middle and working class economies.

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Chapter Four: Progressive, Constructed and Conservative Difference
Approaches to the Female Body in The Duchess and Albert Nobbs

While the previous three chapters have considered how particular strands of feminist thought have been articulated within postfeminist historical women’s films, this chapter explores how one of the foundational debates of feminism manifests within such films: is the relationship between women and men characterised by sexual sameness or sexual difference? Should women, asks Elizabeth Grosz,

be attributed an identity and sociocultural position in terms that make it possible for women to be conceived as men’s equals? Or is woman’s identity to be conceived in terms entirely different from those associated with and provided by men?1

Thus the crux of the matter, according to Grosz, is whether women should seek to be cast as men’s equals, or if it is women’s difference to men that should underpin feminist action. Importantly, this debate is characterised by a lack of resolution, and will likely never be definitively resolved. Indeed, as Denise Riley has persuasively argued,

[e]quality; difference; ‘different but equal’ – the history of feminism since the 1790s has zigzagged and curved through these incomplete oppositions upon which it is itself precariously erected. This swaying motion need not be a wonder, nor a cause for despair. If feminism is the voicing of ‘women’ from the side of ‘women’, then it cannot but act out the full ambiguities of that category.2

As Riley suggests, this lack of resolution is one of feminism’s greatest strengths, as it is from this tension that innovations are born. Certainly, the historical oscillation between sameness and difference theories of the body has resulted in a rich field of feminist thinking about the body.

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Put simply, adherents to theories of sameness within feminist thought underplay the role of biology and bodily matter to women’s life experiences, and instead emphasise women’s capacity to succeed in traditionally “male” realms. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, argued that

[n]o biological, psychical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilisation as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine.³

In other words, differences between women and men are seen as a product of the society in which they live, and not as indicative of “natural” difference. To combat this notion of women’s difference (and presumed inferiority), women’s success or abilities in the public sphere are deployed as evidence of their sameness to men, and thus as a basis for legislated equality. This logic informs both liberal and socialist feminisms, as well as feminist approaches to speech and silence, as seen in the first three chapters of this research.

In contrast, theorists presuming a foundation of sexual difference between women and men take biology as central to explorations of women’s lived experiences. As Christine Di Stefano has argued,

[t]hose who believe that gender differences are significantly basic (in the modernist sense that they are strong conventions which help to constitute men and women as incommensurably different subjects) are more likely to pursue a politics of difference which can speak to women’s alienated (with respect to dominant, male-stream culture) but also potentially critical identity and be employed on behalf of a reconstituted, nonmasculinist social order.⁴

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Paying attention to women’s biology thus opens up for academic exploration the ways that women’s corporeal experiences can have significant ramifications for their priorities within both the public and private spheres. This perspective informs care feminism (to be explored in the following chapter), as well as radical, cultural, Black, Third World, and a host of other feminist theories and positions. While theories of sameness may be dominant, or at least more familiar, in contemporary western society and popular culture more broadly, theories of difference provide an alternative voice and perspective that continues to be visible within popular culture, including the postfeminist historical women’s film.

Given that the sameness/difference debate is, at its core, a debate about the role of the body in feminist thought, it is unsurprising that the tensions between sameness and difference are articulated most clearly within films that take the female body as their focus. These tensions are particularly evident within Saul Dibb’s *The Duchess* (2008) and Rodrigo Garcia’s *Albert Nobbs* (2011), two films which, through taking very different approaches to depicting the experiences of the female body, indicate how the continuing lack of resolution between questions of sexual sameness or sexual difference manifests within contemporary western popular culture.

### The Sameness/Difference Debate

Broadly speaking, there have been five theoretical turns in the sameness/difference debate, each turn as a result of significant innovation in approaches to the gendered body. The first of these was the notion that women’s sexual difference from men is the primary factor underpinning women’s shared experiences. Originally posited by thinkers (often male) like Jean Jacques Rousseau, this cluster of theories determined that men and women are naturally sexually different in terms of physicality, intellect and emotion; indeed, according to Rousseau, “[a] perfect man and a perfect woman should be no more alike in mind than in face, and perfection admits of neither less nor more.” In their idealised forms, women and men thus complement each other in their differences. Importantly, women are celebrated for their maternalism and prioritisation of caring roles, although, as

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Rousseau claimed, man “could do without her better than she can do without him.”  

This coding of men’s and women’s sexual differences as “complementary” thus worked to affirm men’s presumed superiority, and women’s corresponding inferiority.

As a response to this masculinist approach to questions of difference, feminist theorists in the 1950s and 1960s turned instead towards theories of sameness that argued for a distinction between sex and gender. In the famous words of Simone de Beauvoir: “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” According to this argument, gender roles were learnt rather than innate; one had to learn how to do womanhood in order to be counted as a woman. Indeed, while women may have biological differences to men, these differences were minimised; as de Beauvoir has argued, “when the physiological given . . . takes on meaning, this meaning immediately becomes dependent on a whole context.” In other words, biology becomes meaningful only according to particular societal contexts and beliefs; it is thus a patriarchal society that emphasises the difference of “men” and “women” in order to shore up notions of men’s superiority and women’s concomitant “weakness.” Theories of sameness thus emphasise women’s similarity to men, in terms of intellect, physical skills and rationality. While the sex-gender distinction was not born of the liberal political tradition, liberal feminist rhetoric and goals linked particularly well with the priorities of this approach. It is therefore unsurprising that within this strand of feminist thought, women’s success was understood in terms of masculine middle-class models of success, such as succeeding in one’s chosen career and moving throughout the public sphere.

As the second-wave feminist movement gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, however, the measuring of women against male markers of success in the public sphere (particularly through the active pursuit of a career over family) came under increasing scrutiny by feminist sexual difference theorists. Theories of sameness, due to their refusal to theorise from women’s corporeal experience, were increasingly

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7 Rousseau, *Emile*, 600.
understood as sidelining significant aspects of women’s lives and material realities; as Riley has compellingly argued, “from the standpoint of feminism, what has always been lacking is a due recognition of the specificity of women’s bodies, sexual difference as lived.”\(^{10}\) Thus, in an attempt to reclaim these silenced parts of women’s lives, and redefine them on women’s terms, sexual difference theorists like Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich, or later, Elizabeth Grosz,\(^{11}\) refigured women’s sexual differences from men as the grounds for a feminine subjectivity and/or philosophy. By redefining women through their own experiences and embodiment, theories of sexual difference present an alternative approach to the achieving of equality, where women’s differences are foregrounded, rather than silenced, sidelined and ignored.

Within this approach, notions of women’s sexual differences were deployed to empower women, without reference to masculine priorities. Embodied traits and behaviours such as nurturance and pacifism, for example, were understood to result from women’s experiences, and engaging in these behaviours was depicted as positive and life-sustaining for many women.\(^{12}\) Indeed, rather than muting characteristics traditionally coded as “feminine” in favour of those coded as “masculine” in order to achieve equality, radical and cultural feminists of the 1970s and 1980s, according to Di Stefano, “[i]nvok[ed] a strong notion of difference against the gender-neutral pretensions of a rationalist culture that opposes itself to nature, the body, natural contingency, and intuition.”\(^{13}\) In other words, sexual difference theorists’ strategy was to give women permission to be different from men, rather than seeking an ‘equality’


\(^{12}\) See, for example: Sara Ruddick, Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace (London: The Women’s Press, 1989); Daly, Gyn/Ecology; Daly, Pure Lust; Marilyn French, Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals (New York: Summit Books, 1985); Rich, Of Woman Born.

that entailed sameness to men. These new conceptions of sexual difference not only recentred women’s bodies as a legitimate point from which to theorise, but also refigured women’s lives as positive, productive and desirable.

However, this focus on difference has also been subject to significant critiques. In her discussion of radical and cultural feminisms, Linda Alcoff has explored the position that “formulations of womanhood [based in theories of difference], even when made by feminists, ‘tie’ the individual to her identity as a woman and thus cannot represent a solution to sexism.” According to this logic, the fact that women’s sexual difference has often been tied to patriarchal pseudo-explanations of women’s inferiority, and thus deployed as justification for their oppression and subordination, means that any argument that seeks to reconfirm this sexual difference offers little possibility of challenging entrenched views that have linked this difference with inferiority.

Furthermore, the experiences of “woman” and “womanhood” valorised by sexual difference feminists of the 1960s and 1970s were strongly critiqued for being specific to a small group of white, middle-class, heterosexual women; as Charlotte Witt has argued, the deployment of sexual difference theories within feminist theory itself has served to exclude certain women; certain essential features – economic, sexual, reproductive, political – ha[ve] reflected the social positions of the theorisers, in this case middle-class white women.

In other words, feminist theories of sexual difference often uncritically presented the perspectives of its theorisers (predominantly white, middle-class women) as

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14 See: Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism,” 414.
universally representative of all women, and, through emphasising the differences between women and men, made almost impossible the articulation of differences between groups of women. Indeed, by taking sexual difference as the most significant political category, sexual difference theories ignored, as Di Stefano explains, experiences of poverty, class, ethnicity, race, sexual identity, and age, in the lives of women who feel less divided from men as a group than, for example, from white or bourgeois or Anglo or heterosexual men and women.  

Thus by taking sexual difference as the most important difference between individuals, sexual difference theorists often ignored the experiences of women whose class, ethnic, racial and/or religious identity, amongst other factors, played a more important role in the framing of their lives. Indeed, the assumption that sexual differences between men and women are the most significant differences experienced by all women in their daily lives is simplistic and naive, and ignores the very real political and economic factors that impact the material realities of Black women and women of colour, lesbians, disabled women, working-class women, transwomen and the intersections of these lived experiences.

In response to these justified and necessary critiques of sexual difference theories, feminist scholarship in the 1990s broadly turned to revitalised theories of sameness, where notions of sexual difference were conceptualised as constructed and performed, and thus a result of language and systems of representation, rather than as a result of “natural” bodies. Influenced heavily by the work of Judith Butler, these reworked theories of sameness focus particularly on the ways that language and systems of representation function within particular socio-historical contexts in order to make meaning. In other words, the turn to sameness theories that characterised the 1990s highlights the significance of discursive practices to ways of knowing, and

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19 See, for example: Jelke Boesten, “Wartime Rape and Peacetime Inequalities in Peru,” in Feminism and the Body: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, ed. Catherine Kevin (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 89; Fuss, Essentially Speaking, 3; Spelman, Inessential Woman, 14; Catherine Kevin, “Great Expectations: Episodes in a Political History of Pregnancy in Australia Since 1945,” in Feminism and the Body: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, ed. Catherine Kevin (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 49.
thus the ways that language and systems of representation construct reality and subsequently ascribe meaning to the world around us.

This privileging of discursive practices is particularly prevalent within discussions about the body, including sexuality, subjectivity/identity, sex and gender, and is “grounded,” as Alcoff succinctly explains, not “in the belief that human subjects are underdetermined but, rather, in the belief that they are overdetermined (i.e. constructed) by a social discourse and/or cultural practice.” Importantly, these discourses and practices produce bodies that are in line with their priorities; as Butler has argued in the case of the “sexing” of bodies,

‘sex’ is a regulatory ideal whose materialisation is compelled, and this materialisation takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, “sex” is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialised through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialise ‘sex’ and achieve this materialisation through a forcible reiteration of those norms.

Here, Butler argues that sex, rather than being a natural state which is “discovered,” is produced by a matrix of social, medical and institutional discourses, and then written onto the body as “natural.” The knowing of bodies more broadly is thus a dynamic and regulatory process wherein contemporary concerns are written onto the body, and where knowledge about the body is complicit with current societal preoccupations and patterns of power.

While the body may hold a more central position in this iteration of sameness theories, due to a focus on questions of gender, sex and sexuality, the focus on language and systems of representation favoured by this approach has nevertheless refigured the body as broadly representational. Indeed, as Elizabeth Wilson has pointedly declared, “[f]eminist theories of embodiment have proceeded, it would seem, as though the nature of biology is immaterial.”

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20 Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism,” 416.
poststructuralist feminist approaches to the body, while sophisticated and innovative, ultimately obscure the role of biology in lived experience; the body thus becomes physically absent within these theories, and deployed only in representational terms. This relegation of the body to the realm of the symbolic, thus sidelifining the body’s physical materiality, is arguably one of the critiques that has encouraged a reworking of, and thus return to, theories of difference.

Certainly, scholars such as Rosi Braidotti, Susan Bordo and Diana Fuss, for example, reclaim the possibilities of theorising from a position of difference, while also thinking critically about the problematic category of “woman.” Braidotti, for example, argues the merits of sexual difference theory, when she posits that

[s]exual difference theory simultaneously produces and destabilises the category ‘woman’. It binds together both the notions of embodiment and of sexual difference and the link between the two is made by the political will and determination to find a better, a more adequate, representation of embodied female subjectivity. Within this return to theories of difference, an embodied female subjectivity thus becomes paramount, as theorists interrogate what it means to live in a female body and, perhaps more importantly, what other cultural and identity markers intersect with these embodied experiences of femaleness. As Grosz has argued, “the specificity of bodies must be understood in its historical rather than simply its biological concreteness”; there is thus an acknowledgement of how both the matter of biology, as well as how one’s position in a particular socio-historical moment impact, and are impacted by, each other. In other words, it is not enough to theorise the body without reference to social constructs of gender, nor is it enough to theorise the body through the systems of representation by which it is known. Instead, there needs to be an amalgamation of theories that recognise that there is matter prior to language, and

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24 Braidotti, Metamorphoses, 28. See also: Braidotti, Nomadic Subjects, 54; Riley, “Am I That Name?”, 114.

that this matter both impacts, and is impacted by, social constructions of knowledge and meaning.

It is also important to acknowledge how contemporary trans theories seek to further complicate feminist approaches to the body. As Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah and Lisa Jean Moore have argued,

[r]ather than seeing genders as classes or categories that by definition contain only one kind of thing . . . we understand genders as potentially porous and permeable spatial territories . . . each capable of supporting rich and rapidly proliferating ecologies of embodied difference.26

Trans theories thus seek to open up the possibilities of both sex and gender, critically intervening not only in the gender categories of “man” and “woman,” but what it means to be embodied more broadly.

Progressive, Constructed and Conservative Difference Approaches to the Body

The turn back to theories of difference within academic feminism also appears to be reflected within postfeminist discourse. Rosalind Gill has argued that one of the key features of postfeminist thinking is “a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference.”27 Given, however, that feminist approaches to the body periodically oscillate between prioritising sameness and difference, that this debate shows no sign of resolution, and that postfeminism is often characterised as a response to feminism,28 Gill’s identification of a turn to natural sexual differences only partially describes how the body is understood within postfeminist popular culture. Thus within this chapter, I seek to expand and complicate Gill’s articulation of the function of the

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body in postfeminist culture by examining, through the framework of the sameness/difference debate, three competing strands of discourse that inform the depiction of the body in both *The Duchess* and *Albert Nobbs*.

The first of these strands, highlighted already by Gill, is what I call “conservative difference.” Gill has explained that the postfeminist take on natural sexual differences “serves to freeze in place existing inequalities by representing them as inevitable if read correctly as pleasurable.” In other words, according to Gill’s argument, postfeminist deployments of sexual difference are often intended as “pleasurable” to the audience and, as a result, normalise women’s continued inequalities in the public and private spheres. In this way, postfeminist notions of sexual difference are closer to the patriarchal thinking exemplified by Rousseau than the rich field of feminist thought that conceptualised the possibilities of sexual difference as a catalyst for social change. However, this approach is in constant tension with other, more progressive, ways of thinking about female embodiment, and thus replicates the oscillation between sameness and difference that characterises feminist thought regarding the female body more broadly.

The second identifiable strand, which strains against this conservative approach to difference, is a strand I am labelling “progressive difference,” influenced as it is by the feminist approaches to sexual difference canvassed above. This approach views the female body as the grounds for feminist action; indeed, it is the presumed shared experience of women that justifies collective feminist action more broadly. Within this strand, the category of “women” is broadly unproblematised, and sexual difference is presumed to be one of the principle concerns shaping women’s lives. This strand is designated as “progressive” because it evokes the radical rhetoric of social change central to 1960s and 1970s feminism, and is particularly obvious in films where sexism and/or discrimination is overt. However, while this approach to the body may make explicit the ways that sexism and discrimination are overwhelmingly

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29 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 159.
grounded in women’s corporeal differences, its evocation of a “seventies” paradigm of feminist thought, as explored within the previous chapter, goes hand in hand with the postfeminist assumption that the feminist movement is a historical phenomenon that has no relevance for contemporary society. This progressive approach to bodily difference is thus characterised by the postfeminist “double entanglement” of feminist and anti-feminist themes.

The final approach to the body that emerges within postfeminist texts is also borne of a strong feminist intellectual tradition, but with significantly different priorities and concerns than those of progressive difference. I call this final strand “constructed difference” in homage to its roots in poststructuralist, postmodernist, and deconstructionist theories. The “constructed difference” approach in postfeminist texts views difference not as natural or inherent, but as constructed by language and systems of representation. According to this logic, neither gender nor sex are innate; rather, that they are constructed by language and performed into being. Indeed, Butler has argued that:

[s]exual difference is neither fully given nor fully constructed, but partially both. . . . As I understand it, sexual difference is the site where a question concerning the relation of the biological to the cultural is posed and reposed, where it must and can be posed, but where it cannot, strictly speaking, be answered.34

In other words, sexual difference is neither the question nor the answer; rather, it is the foundation on which questions about language and systems of representation, particularly in terms of sexuality and gender performance, can be staged.

Feminist Tropes

A particularly effective way of exploring how these different approaches to the body intersect within postfeminist historical women’s films is by investigating the feminist tropes of corsetry and rape, which act as flashpoints at which the tensions of the competing approaches to the body are particularly marked. Feminist tropes, as I

understand them, are tropes that readily invoke a feminist perspective or position on an issue historically significant to the feminist movement, and thus establish a particular film’s feminist credentials. This notion of feminist tropes builds on the work of Teresa de Lauretis’ 1990 article, “Guerrillas in the Midst: Women’s Cinema in the 80s,” where she explores the simultaneous strategies of legitimation and delegitimation that were occurring within women’s films (by which she means, deliberately ambiguously, “films about women” of the 1980s. She identifies themes of “women’s independence” and “lesbianism” as circulating themes that work to bring feminist concepts (amongst others) to the fore in such films, only to be juxtaposed against competing themes, such as “women’s sexuality as excessive,” which undermine any potential feminist message. Similar to these themes identified by de Lauretis, I have identified two feminist tropes that circulate within postfeminist historical chick flicks and appear to “derive from a generic, much oversimplified image of feminism:” corsetry and rape. The similarities between de Lauretis’ article and my own research are significant, for they indicate that despite the passing of thirty years, depictions of identifiably feminist women on film continue to be implicated within broader anti-feminist cultural discourses.

Unlike de Lauretis, however, I argue that the tropes at the centre of my analysis reflect the “entanglement of feminist and antifeminist themes” within postfeminist texts, where the tropes are not necessarily either favourable or hostile to the feminist project. Rather, these two tropes refract the three competing approaches to the body that are central to this analysis, and thus indicate how the sameness/difference debate continues to influence how the gendered body is depicted in postfeminist popular culture. By investigating the deployment of the feminist tropes of corsetry and rape inAlbert Nobbs and The Duchess, this chapter thus investigates how the intertwining of progressive, constructed and conservative approaches to bodily difference informs depictions of the body in the postfeminist historical women’s film, and indeed postfeminist popular culture more widely.

39 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149.
Synopses

Set in late eighteenth-century England, Saul Dibbs’ 2008 film *The Duchess* is based on Amanda Foreman’s 1998 biography, *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire*,⁴⁰ and stars Keira Knightley as Georgiana – or “Gee” as she is known throughout the film – and Ralph Fiennes as the emotionally distant Duke of Devonshire, often only referred to as “The Duke.” The film begins with the Duke of Devonshire arranging his marriage to Gee through her mother, and then follows Gee through her seemingly loveless marriage, her difficulty conceiving a son, her interest in the politics of the Whig Party, her love affair with future Prime Minister Charles Grey (Dominic Cooper), and her passionate friendship with Bess (Hayley Atwell): the woman who becomes her husband’s life-long, live-in mistress. Within this film, Gee’s body acts as a canvas for the multiple oppressions faced by women in this time period: she is physically restrained by her clothing, controlled bodily by her husband, and considered worthy only in terms of her ability to bear her husband a male heir to continue the family line.

The second film explored in this chapter, Rodrigo Garcia’s 2011 film *Albert Nobbs*, is based on playwright and theatre director Simone Benmussa’s 1977 dramatisation of Irish author George Moore’s novella,⁴¹ and tells the story of Albert Nobbs (Glenn Close), a senior waiter in a hotel in Dublin in the 1860s. Albert is assumed by all around him to be male; however, when forced to share his bed with visiting house painter Hubert Page (Janet McTeer), it is revealed to the audience that Albert is a biological woman posing as and living as a man. The next day, it is revealed that Hubert too, is a woman living as a man, and is also married to another woman, Cathleen (Bronagh Gallagher). Inspired by Hubert’s happiness, the lonely Albert decides to pursue a courtship with one of the hotel’s maids, Helen Dawes (Mia Wasikowska), with the hope of one day opening a tobacconist’s store with her as his wife. Helen, however, merely uses Albert for his money, as she is already in a relationship with the hotel’s handyman Joe Mackins (Aaron Taylor-Johnson). Despite Helen’s contempt for him, Albert continues to pursue her, even after she becomes pregnant with Joe’s child. After a brief fight with Joe over his treatment of the now-pregnant Helen, Albert dies of a head injury sustained in the fight, and is finally

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revealed diegetically as a woman. The close of the film sees the return of recently widowed Hubert Page, who vows to care for Helen and her son, Albert.

**Corsetry in The Duchess**

One of the most obvious strategies that *The Duchess* uses to indicate its feminist credentials is its depiction of the corset. Indeed, the corset has long been identified by feminists as indicative of women’s systematic oppression and lesser status within historical periods in which corset-wearing was expected; Susan Bordo, for example, argues that “the nineteenth-century corset caused its wearer physical incapacitation, but it also served as an emblem of the power of culture to impose its designs on the female body.”42 Within this logic, corsets are emblematic of women’s oppression more broadly, and act as a physical object which women can “throw off” in order to demonstrate their freedom from patriarchal expectations of women and femininity. It is important to note, however, that the corset of the trope is a historical artefact, as distinct from its contemporary erotic wear successor, and its troping as a shorthand for a progressive feminist sensibility simultaneously shores up postfeminist narratives that assert the irrelevance of feminism for contemporary society.

Indeed, this postfeminist perspective is evoked by perspectives that have sought to find agency in corset-wearing, expressing notions of conservative and constructed difference, wherein the constraining of the female body is read in terms of female choice, empowerment and, most importantly, pleasure. Indeed, as John Harvey has argued, within corset-wearing societies, “there is a degree of exaggeration of the supposititious body that indicates in the designers, the wearers, and almost in the clothes themselves, a shared pleasure in sensuous self-caricaturing.”43 Here, Harvey appears to be drawing on the same postfeminist logic that informs conservative difference, for, if the constraining of the body is done by women for themselves, for their own pleasure, then the ways that corsetry may conform to traditional forms of femininity become irrelevant.44

44 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 162.
Simultaneously, however, Harvey’s explanation of corset-wearing also reflects the influence of constructed difference, as he draws on notions of performance and performativity through describing corset-wearing as “self-caricaturing.”⁴⁵ Here, Harvey imbues corset-wearing with a sense of self-aware agency, where there is a pleasure taken in adhering to, but then purposely exceeding, expectations of the female body. Within this perspective the corseted body becomes a visual site of the construction of sexual difference, as it is a hyper-female body that is being exaggerated. There is thus a slippage between constructed and conservative difference approaches to the corset-wearing body, as it is the agency held by the wearer that is deemed central to the meanings of the corset.

There is a jostling between progressive and conservative approaches to difference within The Duchess that is particularly evident through an exchange between Gee and The Duke on their wedding night, when the audience is told, and then shown, how the female body is physically constrained by the corset. At this point in the film, the Duke is cutting Gee’s wedding dress off her with a pair of scissors, as he lacks the patience to undress her any other way:

DUKE: For the life of me, I could never understand why women’s clothes must be so damn complicated.
GEE: It’s just our way of expressing ourselves, I suppose.
DUKE: Whatever do you mean?
GEE: Well, you have so many ways of expressing yourselves, whereas we must make do with our hats and our dresses.

As The Duke removes Gee’s clothing, layer by layer, the film cuts to a close-up of Gee’s back, which is criss-crossed with the indentations from her corset strings. This somewhat shocking image can be seen to affirm Bordo’s claim that corsets “serve as an emblem of the power of culture to impose its designs on the female body.”⁴⁶ Indeed, the shot of Gee’s corset-scarred back distils the broader message of the whole scene into one graphic visual: as a woman, Gee is vulnerable in this relationship. Here, the alignment between the trope of the corset and progressive approaches to difference is clear; by forcing the audience to gaze upon Gee’s scarred back, even for a

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⁴⁵ Harvey, “Showing and Hiding,” 75.
brief moment, a feminist perspective on Gee’s subordination is encouraged. The fact that Gee has spoken, prior to the revelation of her back, about women’s inability to express themselves within this society more broadly provides additional support for the shot’s alignment with progressive feminist approaches to difference.

Simultaneously, however, there is also evidence of conservative difference within this scene. While brief, the presence of conservative difference indicates the tensions within the sameness/difference debate, and how these tensions manifest within postfeminist popular culture. Within the dialogue highlighted above, the Duke declares his bemusement with the complicated nature of women’s clothing. While this exchange opens the dialogue between Gee and the Duke that eventually leads to the shot of her corset-scarred back, the line “[f]or the life of me, I could never understand why women’s clothes must be so damn complicated” also references a postfeminist trope that centralises these notions of conservative difference: the expectation that “men and women just do not understand each other.”47 Referencing John Gray’s Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus48 self-help book, Gill discusses how, within postfeminist culture, men’s and women’s differences are understood as fundamental; the “communication, customs and ‘funny ways’” expressed by men or women thus need to be “translat[ed]” or “mediat[ed]” to be opposite sex.49 Within this scene, Gee is clearly translating that the complexity of women’s clothing acts as a form of self-expression. The Duke’s bemusement at this explanation further props up this trope, as this explanation is performed, in the words of Gill, “in a manner . . . that still systematically privileges male power.”50 That Gee explains to the Duke her reasoning, but is answered only with an exhalation of air, indicates that his power is privileged within this exchange. He is under no duress to accept, or even acknowledge her argument. Gee’s response may indicate a feminist sensibility, but the Duke’s control of the scene indicates that there has been no undermining of male privilege here. While the notion of progressive difference may be the dominant strand influencing the reading of the film, especially when framed by the feminist trope of the corset, the exchange between the Duke and Gee simultaneously reveals how notions of

47 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 159.
49 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 159.
50 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 159.
conservative difference are woven through the scene, perhaps undermining what appears to be a markedly feminist moment.

*The Duchess* and Marital Rape

The ambivalent representation of the corset within *The Duchess* is also mirrored in the film’s deployment of rape, with a scene depicting Gee’s rape by The Duke demonstrating the complex interaction of feminist approaches to the body. The scene is particularly rich in ambiguities, and careful analysis reveals the ways that progressive difference approaches to the body are interwoven with notions of constructed difference. While this is no doubt a powerful scene, its ideological confusion is perhaps emblematic of the wider dissonance between feminisms of sameness and feminisms of difference.

The deployment of the rape trope within this film, as within the postfeminist historical women’s film more broadly, is strategic. Within a subgenre or genre of films that prioritises women’s experiences and perspectives, the deployment of the rape trope against the protagonist will always be indicative of a progressive feminist sensibility, as the crime of rape foregrounds a core conviction of all feminist theory: that women have the right to autonomy over their own bodies, and have the right to choose how, when, and with whom they have sexual contact. Given that the rape occurs within marriage within *The Duchess*, however, the deployment of the trope in this film is more complex than depictions in other postfeminist historical women’s films as, just like the obsoleting of the corset, marital rape is an issue that is broadly considered resolved in contemporary western cultures, due to the passing of legislation prohibiting sexual contact without consent.

The marital rape trope is also particularly useful for the way it simplifies eighteenth-century relationships that were governed by different social rules for a contemporary audience. In contrast to Foreman’s argument that, “[e]ighteenth-century society tolerated anything so long as there was no scandal,” the marital rape trope contributes to a reimagining of the relationship between the Duke, Gee and Bess as one of patriarchal power and concomitant female dependence, rather than one of competing and strategic interests. In an exchange that is persuasively invested in

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revealing the power dynamics within their marriage, and the broader society, Gee suggests that she and the Duke make a deal, whereby she gives her blessing to the adulterous relationship between the Duke and Bess if her relationship with Charles Grey is accepted:

GEE: Then let us make a deal.

DUKE: A deal?

GEE: Yes. I give you my blessing if you will accept my feelings for Charles Grey. I didn’t realise it at first. I thought that perhaps it was only a dalliance. He can make me happy.


BESS: William.

DUKE: Be quiet. Are you determined to make me a total laughingstock? A man who cannot sire a son, and then a cuckold?

BESS: William, Georgiana only asks what we ourselves –

DUKE: Be quiet, woman! Are you his whore?

GEE: No. But I can’t see why you’d mind. You have Bess and three boys!

DUKE: Three boys? Do you think I can make those bastards my heirs?

Well? Do you?!

The result of this exchange is Gee leaving the table, only to be followed by the Duke and raped in her chambers. It is a violent scene, as the audience sees the Duke force Gee onto the bed and then pull her legs open. The scene then cuts to the closed bedroom door, from behind which Gee’s screams emerge. Bess follows the screams, and stands tensely outside the door, only to hurry away Gee’s curious adopted step-daughter, Charlotte. As Gee’s shrieks echo throughout Devonshire House, there are also shots of the servants listening, and appearing quite dejected. After The Duke has finished raping her, Gee remains on the bed, facing away from the Duke while he buttons his pants. He states, “Give me a son. Until then, stay here and do as I say,” and begins to walk away. As he walks, the camera focuses on Gee’s hand, which clenches into a fist, and then releases.
The progressive sensibility of this scene is difficult to ignore. Possibly its most significant aspect of progressive difference centres around the question of consent (or lack thereof), since the scene is constructed in a way that Gee’s refusal to consent is never in any doubt. Indeed, Gee’s body language communicates her frustration and anger throughout the scene; she initially walks briskly away from the table and tries to evade the Duke by going to her rooms and closing the door firmly behind her. When she is confronted with his intrusion into the rooms, her anger is expressed not only through her tense posture, but her dialogue also very clearly demonstrates her lack of consent. She shrieks “No!” “Don’t touch me!” and “Get off me!” – phrases which are very clear in their meaning, especially when the fear in her voice is heard. This is further emphasised by the music that accompanies the scene, which is menacing, warning the audience of danger.

Despite the thread of conservative difference that weaves through the earlier corset scene, Gee’s obvious and sustained distress and lack of consent shuts down any possibility that this scene might be read in terms of romance where, as influential scholar Janice Radway has posited, “violence is acceptable . . . if it is described sparingly, if it is controlled carefully, or if it is clearly traceable to the passion or jealousy of the hero.”52 Such tropes are markedly absent from this scene; Gee clearly does not change her mind and surrender to the “pleasure” of the encounter, nor is The Duke’s violence based in jealousy, but rather in his desire to reaffirm his power over her. The rape is also not depicted sparingly; while we do not see the act itself, the echoing shrieks of Gee’s pain and fear make very clear the fact that she is suffering, and that her suffering is prolonged.

This progressive sensibility, however, is arguably undermined by the concomitant thread of constructed difference that informs the scene, particularly in terms of its status as an addition to the screenplay. Indeed, given that there is no evidence in Foreman’s biography that such an incident occurred, the body in this film is no longer representative of Gee’s own material experiences; rather, her individual bodily experience comes to stand in for women’s oppression and inequalities more broadly. Indeed, the injection of the rape scene into this film demonstrates Tanya Horeck’s compelling argument that

[r]ape . . . is often made to serve as a ‘sign’ for other issues, and it is also frequently used as a means of expressing ideological and political questions concerning the functioning of the body politic.\textsuperscript{53}

Gee’s rape is thus represented less in terms of the physical experience of being raped (it occurs behind a closed door), and more in terms of the emotional neglect she suffers in her marriage, her lack of agency within her marriage, and the lack of protection she is afforded by the law. Her rape is imbued with the suffering she experiences as a woman throughout her whole life, thus indicating the “overdetermined”\textsuperscript{54} nature of the body signalled by theories of constructed difference.

This relegation of Gee’s body to the realm of the symbolic is achieved through the framing of the scene. The audience only sees the lead up to and the aftermath of the rape; the rest of the scene skips between the reactions of Bess, Charlotte and the servants at Devonshire House. By drawing attention to the fact that other characters are able to hear Gee’s suffering, the scene arguably becomes more about the reactions of other characters to Gee’s rape, than about Gee’s experience of her own rape.

Bess, for example, after hearing Gee’s screams, is seen running down the hallway towards Gee’s rooms. When faced with the door, she moves a few steps forward, then halts, listening to Gee’s screams. There is a close-up of Bess’ face, who is breathing heavily due to the adrenaline and the stress of the situation, and appears to be on the verge of tears. As she listens, there are running footsteps behind her, as the Duke’s illegitimate daughter Charlotte, who Gee has raised as her own, has run to see what commotion is about. Bess tells Charlotte to come with her; the camera focuses on the girl, who looks back at the door from which the screams are echoing. Here, Bess’ helplessness is emphasised. She has followed the screams because she is concerned for her best friend, and her tears are for the suffering of Gee; yet she cannot intervene, for she is not only loyal to the Duke, but also dependent on his good will to remain in his home. Her focus is thus on Charlotte, and reducing the harm that may come to Charlotte by bearing (audible) witness to her stepmother’s rape. That Charlotte looks back at the door, however, suggests that Bess’ protection is not enough to shield her

\textsuperscript{53} Tanya Horeck, \textit{Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film} (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 7.

\textsuperscript{54} Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism,” 416.
from the dysfunctionality of the Duke’s and Duchess’ marriage, and that perhaps this is Charlotte’s first insight into the womanhood which awaits her in this time period.

The scene then cuts to a large room with columns, where footmen or servants are waiting for instruction. Gee’s screams are faint, but audible, and there is a close up of one particular footman who looks resigned to what he hears. The next shot returns to Gee’s rooms, where the audience sees the aftermath of the rape. The inclusion of the servants in the rape scene, however, indicates not only the intensity of Gee’s suffering, but also that the servants particularly are forced to bear (audible) witness to her rape. Relying on the Duke for their income, the servants are unable to intervene; they must remain at their posts, and thus become complicit in the Duke’s rape of his wife. The scene thus symbolises the power the Duke holds over all of those within his household. He is, as he states smugly in the exchange with Gee mentioned above, “in charge of it all.” Gee thus embodies the vulnerabilities of the entire household in this rape scene and, as such, becomes a symbol for powerlessness more broadly. In this way, the scene alerts the audience to the ways that, despite sex and class differences, “underneath we are all the same.”

The depiction of Gee’s body within The Duchess thus neatly encapsulates the tensions of the sameness/difference debate. Through the deployment of feminist tropes of rape and corsetry, the film powerfully engages with notions of progressive difference, where female bodily difference to the male body is seen as grounds for women’s collective identity, particularly due to their shared experience of subordination and discrimination. Simultaneously, however, this progressive approach to the female body is interwoven with both strands of conservative and constructed difference, where the female body is unknowable by the superordinate male, and then relegated to the realm of symbolism. Indeed, by framing the body as symbolic, the radical possibilities offered by progressive theorisations based on embodiment are silenced, and the concept of the body according to theories of sameness is re-established as the norm.

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55 Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism,” 420-1.
This notion of sameness is also reiterated as the norm within *Albert Nobbs* although, unlike *The Duchess*, this sense of sexual sameness is established predominantly through the evocation of constructed difference, most notably by drawing our attention to questions of the sex-gender distinction, and thus the concepts of sex and gender as constructed. Indeed, the story of *Albert Nobbs* holds an important, but perhaps popularly unnoticed position in the history of feminist thinking about sex and gender. Charlotte McIvor, for example, has noted that Simone Benmussa’s 1977 stage adaptation of the novella, *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs*, “indexes a moment in feminist scholarship where sex and gender were becoming understood largely in relationship to ‘performance’ as a paradigm of analysis.” In other words, this play was produced in a period when feminist theory was beginning to posit that gender itself is a performance that, through repetition, becomes normalised. Alongside this notion of gender as a performance was a corresponding challenge to the presumed “naturalness” of sex differences; as Judith Butler has argued,

‘[s]ex’ is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility. In other words, the concept of “sex” is deeply entwined with social and institutional notions of power; being assigned a “sex” at birth paves the way for the expectations of, and opportunities allowable to, each “sex” within a specific historical and cultural moment. In Butler’s framework, sex is no longer understood as a natural state of being, but is instead heavily reliant upon the existing priorities and discourses of power that structure a particular society.

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Popular understandings of gender have also been unsettled by the work of Butler, as she posits that gender can be considered as “a corporeal style, an ‘act’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.” In other words, there is not a dichotomous relationship where sex is aligned with the body, and gender is aligned with the mind. Rather, gender is constructed through the repetitive behaviours we engage in that locate us at a point on the gender spectrum, somewhere between “feminine” and “masculine.” In less abstract terms, one can be considered more or less feminine or more or less masculine, depending both on the type of behaviours one repeats every day, as well as the social and cultural context in which these behaviours are performed.

Indeed, one of the ways that the notion of gender as a performance becomes particularly evident within *Albert Nobbs* is through a comparison of the competing masculinities performed by Albert and Hubert. Alison Oram, in her identification of Albert and Hubert as “the two ‘Berts,’” suggests that the two characters mirror each other, specifically in the contrasting forms of masculinity the two choose, or are able, to enact. Significantly, of these contrasting forms of masculinity, one of those forms is clearly constructed as more desirable than the other. Within this film, the preferred and idealised form of masculinity is performed by Hubert, while Albert is depicted as lacking, especially in comparison. This comparison demonstrates Christopher Forth’s argument about the hierarchy of masculinities within a given society:

> [d]espite the plurality of masculinities that can coexist at any given time, it remains true that . . . a quite specific form of essentialised and embodied (and usually absent or submerged) masculinity becomes the object of loss and grief.

According to this logic, we can read Hubert’s idealisation as part of a cultural nostalgia for an essentialised masculinity. This nostalgia is for a specific form of masculinity; as Oram explains,

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Hubert fits the conventional ideals of working-class masculinity of the period; demonstrating strength or skill in masculine work, the ability to ‘be a good fellow’ in socialising with other men, and success as a breadwinner supporting a respectable household.63 Indeed, Hubert is popular amongst all the workers at Morrison’s Hotel; he flirts and jokes with all the female workers in a friendly way that endears him to them all. His physical strength and ability to engage in manual labour has allowed him to partake in the privileges of masculinity: setting up his own home, getting married, working for himself and a freedom to move through the city. In contrast, Albert is a tense loner who always keeps up a front of professionalism with his colleagues. He neither has his own home, nor does he work for himself; instead, he dreams of a future where he may combine these two aspirations in running a tobacconist’s shop.

Significantly, the mirroring of these two characters also draws attention to the ways that masculinity, at least within this film, is coded according to the body’s constructed performance, not its biology. Indeed, the fact that Hubert and Albert are both women, yet are both successfully passing as men makes explicit the fact that masculinity is a performance, thus undermining the possibilities of sexual difference. That Albert and Hubert have been socially recognised as male, despite their significant height and weight discrepancies, also indicates that not only is there a great deal of difference in what constitutes a biologically “female” or a “male” body, but that these differences only become meaningful according to the notions of gender that shape a particular society. In other words, according to the logic of this film, and theories of constructed difference more broadly, bodies in and of themselves have no internal meaning; it is through the discourses of gender, and the ways that these discursive genders are performed, that bodies become meaningful as “male” or “female.”64

While the comparison between Albert and Hubert certainly props up notions of constructed difference, and supports the idea that “underneath we are all the same,”65 such a comparison also, to a certain degree, recentralises the body as a legitimate site of theorisation. Indeed, this comparison between Hubert and Albert illustrates how the relationship between sex (or the physical body) and gender acts like a Mobius

64 See: Fausto-Sterling, Sexing the Body, 3; Kevin, “Great Expectations,” 49; Bordo, “Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism,” 149.
65 Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism,” 420-1.
strip\textsuperscript{66} where gender and sex both constantly and consistently influence, and are influenced by, each other. Hubert’s strength, for example, highlights the malleability of the body, explained by Susan Foster through the figure of the dancer. As Foster argues, “[a]natomy is not destiny. The dancer cultivates the body through training regimens that develop its strength, flexibility, endurance, and coordination.”\textsuperscript{67} In other words, the body’s shape and abilities can be altered through deliberate or unintentional actions. Hubert is a manual labourer, and so his size is thus increased as a result of this labour. His confidence, perhaps as a result of his powerful labourer’s body, then allows him to take up much more room than Albert; his sphere of movement is increased, and we therefore see him as a much “bigger” personality and character. In contrast, in order to be a good waiter Albert needs to make himself somewhat invisible, only appearing to the hotel’s guests when he is needed. His sphere of movement is therefore reduced and carefully controlled. His work in the service industry thus necessitates his physical diminishment, as to move about carefully and silently seeing to the needs of others is what makes Albert so successful at his job. It is also his work in the service industry that allows him a “certain leeway” with his performance of masculinity, as his position as a waiter – feminised in comparison to Hubert, but still “appropriately” masculine – permits him to remain, as Oram has labelled him, an “asexual androgyne,”\textsuperscript{68} without censure.

Yet despite his apparent success at passing as male, the film also makes clear that this success is not without its costs. In a sobering reminder of the stakes of gender identification, Butler warns,

one might consider that identification is always an ambivalent process. . . . This “being a man” and this “being a woman” are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy.\textsuperscript{69}


\textsuperscript{67} Foster, “Choreographies of Gender,” 7. See also: de Beauvoir, \textit{The Second Sex}, 45; Spelman, \textit{Inessential Woman}, 67.

\textsuperscript{68} Oram, “Breeches of Convention,” 47.

\textsuperscript{69} Butler, \textit{Bodies That Matter}, 126-127.
The ambivalence of this process is never more evident than when Albert and Hubert briefly resume their female identities. At this point within the film, Albert has survived typhus, and gone to visit the Pages to make sure they have also survived. Upon arrival at the Page household, Albert is greeted with the sight of a black mourning banner and a grieving Hubert: Cathleen has died. When being shown the dresses that Cathleen, a dressmaker, had made, Albert responds with “They’re very beautiful. I can’t remember what it’s like.” The scene then cuts to Albert and Hubert, both wearing dresses and bonnets, cautiously leaving the house and seeking to once again pass as women. As the two reach the beach, Albert breaks into an ungainly run, seemingly simply enjoying the freedom of being a woman in a dress. But then, unaccustomed to wearing a dress, Albert stumbles and awkwardly falls.

There are several contradictory readings that can be applied to this scene. The first reading reaffirms the performativity of gender, as the scene makes explicit the ways that Albert and Hubert, despite their biological femaleness, fail to adhere to traditional expectations of femininity. Hubert, for example, maintains his strong, erect posture, long strides and heavy footfalls, even while wearing a dress. His way of walking is coded as masculine for the way he unapologetically takes up the space required by his body; the juxtaposition between this confident style of movement and his dress and bonnet is quite striking. While Albert’s relatively timid movements within the dress may seem less visually jarring than Hubert’s, his difficulty in negotiating the realities of wearing a dress when running arguably demonstrates an equally failed femininity. The way a body moves, or fails to move, within certain types of clothing is thus a particularly compelling marker and producer of gender; as Joanne Entwistle has argued:

dress is always located spatially and temporally: when getting dressed one orientates oneself/body to the situation, acting in particular ways upon the surfaces of the body in ways that are likely to fit within the established norms of that situation. Thus the dressed body is not a passive object, acted upon by social forces, but actively produced through particular, routine and mundane practices.70

Albert’s and Hubert’s clumsy movements whilst wearing the dresses, and simultaneous success at passing as male, thus reaffirm the notion that neither femininity nor masculinity are innate; rather, they must be practised in order to appear natural.

While apparently reaffirming the notion of gender as performance, however, this scene also brings to the fore the possibility that understanding the body as constructed, and theories of sameness more broadly, are unable to account for the body in ways that reflect lived experiences. The scene is tinged with a mixture of sadness and nostalgia; as he runs down the beach with his arms open, Albert appears to be briefly at peace. Indeed, this is the freest that we see Albert in the whole film; during his run his body language is open and loose, whereas in the rest of the film he is tense and constrained, and controls his sphere of movement very carefully. While, as Butler suggests, “this being a man and being a woman are internally unstable affairs,” the sense of freedom shown by Albert in that moment of wearing a dress on the beach suggests a joy in the acknowledgment of his female embodiment, and thus the importance of exploring a particularly female embodiment more broadly. Indeed, despite his success at passing as a male, there is perhaps a need to acknowledge his biological femaleness that is going unfulfilled in his male gender performance.

Alternatively, the sense of freedom that pervades this scene could indicate Albert’s relief at having his sex and gender align in a society that insists on a binary division between genders; indeed, for this brief moment he is like everyone else whose sex and gender do align. Within such a reading, embodiment is depicted as a key aspect of not only identity, but also personal freedom, both in terms of an individual’s happiness, and their acceptance by the community more widely. In some ways, then, the scene arguably canvases the notion that perhaps there is a biological basis to gender and gender identity, that Albert’s embodiment does impact both his lived experiences and his identity more broadly.

Corsetry and Rape in Albert Nobbs

The influence of progressive difference in terms of engaging with the body as both a site of identity and social meaning more broadly is further highlighted through the film’s deployment of the feminist tropes of rape and corsetry. Unlike The Duchess,

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Butler, Bodies That Matter, 126-127.
in which these tropes were significant to the film’s plot, corsetry and rape are deployed with a far lighter touch within *Albert Nobbs*. For example, the rape trope is only briefly visible; indeed, the rape itself does not occur within the film but rather is mentioned by Albert, in passing, as the justification for his assuming of a male gender identity. At this point in the film, both Albert and Hubert have revealed themselves to be women, and Albert has decided to visit Hubert in order to find out how Hubert manages his life as a woman passing as a man who is married to another woman. In the course of the scene, Hubert invites Albert to tell him the story of how he came to be living as a man. Albert describes how his nurse was a woman who was paid to raise him on behalf of his mother’s family and how, on the death of this mother that he had never known, Albert and his nurse had relocated to a poor area in order to find paid work. After the death of his nurse, Albert was, at age 14, gang-raped. The description of the rape is as follows:

[o]ne night there was – There was five of them. They caught me, and they – they pulled me about. It was under the stairs. They hurt me. And then they left me there. Soon after that, I – I heard there was to be a big dinner at the Freemasons’ Hall and that they were short of waiters. And back then, my – my figure was just right for a waiter, so I managed to get a second-hand suit of clothes. An evening suit. I didn’t think they’d hire me, but they were short-handed and I got the job.

Here, while the word “rape” is not used, the presence of “five of them” and Albert being “pulled about” and hurt “under the stairs” means that the implication of gang-rape is clear. Yet it is a brief moment within the conversation; Albert spends more time talking about his first job as a waiter than he does about the rape. So while the rape trope is there, and arguably acts, by virtue of its long history, as a shorthand invitation to adopt a feminist sensibility, it is a more detached depiction, and thus significantly different from the rape scene in *The Duchess*.

The deployment of this trope suggests that while notions of progressive difference do circulate within this film, notions of constructed difference, where the experiences of the body become obscured in favour of a focus on language and systems of representation, remain dominant. Significantly, however, the original novella contains no such assumption of Albert’s being gang-raped; while Albert was
afraid of being “pulled about” by rough men, the only violence he specifically describes
is when a bugle-player, who began to bully her after her nurse and companion died, “twisted my arm until I thought he’d broken it.”\footnote{See: Moore, Albert Nobbs, 23.} The addition of the implied gang-rape in Albert’s past thus functions in the same way that the rape scene does in The Duchess, and indicates the presence of notions of progressive difference within the film, even if the film more broadly appears to be engaging with notions of constructed difference.

The use of the corsetry trope is deployed equally deftly within the film; indeed, it is never mentioned in dialogue, and only becomes visible when Albert struggles to remove a flea from his undergarments. Significantly, the corset is revealed mere seconds before Albert’s identity as a woman is discovered by Hubert and the audience. As he undoes his night shirt to find the flea, the audience is shown that Albert’s body is bound by a corset-like garment, presumably designed to flatten his breasts. It is at this point that Hubert, who is sharing Albert’s bed on the request of hotel’s landlady, interjects with “Jesus. You’re a woman,” thus clarifying verbally the audience’s discovery. While the corset itself is never discussed between the two, the brief shot of Albert’s corset positions the audience to read a progressive feminist sensibility into the film. That the shot of Albert’s corset is sandwiched between his initial panic about the flea, and Hubert’s finding out that he is a biological woman, also imbues the garment with anxiety. Indeed, the film makes clear that the corsetry Albert has been using is not simply physical, but mental as well, as the keeping of this embodied secret for twenty years has caused him immense emotional strain.

Importantly, however, this psychological pressure is not shared by Hubert. When Hubert reveals the next day that he is also a woman living as a man, he does so by undoing his work overcoat and revealing his unrestrained breasts. That Hubert is able to live his life/pass as male without flattening his breasts is significant, as it suggests that he is much freer than Albert, both physically and emotionally. Indeed, his lack of corset suggests that Hubert has a mastery over both his life and body that Albert is lacking. This control, and resulting freedom, is particularly significant given that Hubert’s role in this film, and the relationship between Hubert and Albert, has been expanded from both Moore’s novella and Benmussa’s play. This expansion of Hubert’s
character has meant that he, more so than any of the other characters in the film, reflects the concerns and priorities of the postfeminist cultural context in which the film was produced.

Postfeminism in *Albert Nobbs*

One of the key features of postfeminist thinking evident within Hubert’s character is the emphasis on “choice and empowerment”\(^7\) within his life, particularly in terms of gender performance. This is particularly evident when, after revealing to Albert that he is also a woman, Hubert tells Albert the brief story of why he chose this way of life:

HUBERT: Do you want to hear my story? There’s not much to tell. I was married. To a house painter, as it happens. A drunk and a bully. One night, he came home scuttered, gave me the usual hiding. Only this time he rounded it off with an almighty kick. And that was the end of that.

ALBERT: What did you do?

HUBERT: I took his things and I left. This is his work coat. I kept it all these years to remember him by, the fucking waster.

Here, Hubert’s decision to leave his husband and start his life anew is figured as empowered and rewarding. One night, he simply left his husband, never to return. He, unlike Albert, appears to have suffered no long term confusion or struggle; instead, he basks in the glory of his new male life. He is free to make a living, and has set up his own home. Indeed, the easy-going Hubert acts as a foil to the constrained and tense Albert, thus implying that Albert’s gender-bending should be a joyful experience, not unlike the freedoms felt by Hubert when he chose to leave his abusive husband and begin his life anew as a man. Significantly, however, this explanation departs markedly

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from Benmussa’s play, where it is revealed that Hubert left his two daughters behind, as well as his husband. This elimination of Hubert’s history as a mother in favour of emphasising his individual empowerment indicates that motherhood and personal empowerment are incompatible according to postfeminist logic; had the film followed Hubert’s original narrative path, in which he was a mother who left his daughters in the custody of their abusive father, and then decided to return to the family upon discovering Albert’s death, Hubert would have been a significantly less aspirational figure. This tension between motherhood and personal empowerment in postfeminist logic will be expanded in the following chapter, where I consider how theories of care feminism are markedly absent in the postfeminist historical women’s film.

Hubert’s position as an empowered character also becomes evident through another feature of postfeminism: that of self-surveillance. Gill has argued that postfeminist media culture stresses a “new emphasis on self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-discipline,” where “women’s bodies are evaluated, scrutinised and dissected by women and men and are always at risk of failing.” Hubert has seemingly internalised this need for self-surveillance but, in stark contrast to Albert, is much more empowered, and indeed in control, of his approach. This is evidenced when Albert goes to visit Hubert to seek understanding of how he is able to live this way, and the following exchange occurs:

ALBERT: I thought you’d be dressed as a woman at home.
HUBERT: And what if a neighbour passing by happened to look in the window?
ALBERT: So, you never wear a dress?
HUBERT: It’s safer this way. But I don’t need to tell you that. And anyway, it’s not like we robbed a bank, or killed someone.

Hubert seems to practice vigilance, without resorting to the extreme rejection of human intimacy that Albert has favoured. Indeed, the film suggests that Hubert has freely chosen this way of life, has chosen to leave his violent husband, has chosen to trust Cathleen with his secret, has chosen to marry, and so has found happiness. Hubert’s happiness therefore appears to valorise the postfeminist focus on choice and

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74 See: Benmussa, The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs, 75-76.
75 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 155.
76 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149.
individualism identified by Gill: “[t]he notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses, which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any imbalances or inequalities whatsoever.” Hubert appears to personify the postfeminist subject who is no longer constrained by imbalances or inequalities; it would seem that the choice to leave his violent husband begat other choices which Hubert, as a neoliberal postfeminist subject, delighted in making, and was appropriately rewarded for making. As Marilyn Strathern has compellingly argued, “[c]hoice has become the privileged vantage point from which to measure all action”; and because of the agency he seems to have, the audience is positioned to view Hubert’s actions positively.

In contrast, Albert depicts the experience of self-surveillance without empowerment, and thus the underside of a postfeminism that prioritises narratives of empowerment over all else. Albert’s only way to ensure self-surveillance has been to distance himself, both emotionally and physically, from companionship in order to protect his secret, and to ensure that his woman’s body does not fail him again as it did when he was younger. He is zealous in protecting this isolation, spurning attempts at friendship, ensuring for many years that no one would become close enough to him to discover his true female identity. The level of self-scrutiny to which Albert subjects himself is clearly a burden, and his sustained performance of such significant emotional labour in order to maintain a broadly accepted gender identity and protect his secret thus indicates the magnitude of his disempowerment.

This comparison between Albert’s and Hubert’s experiences of choice thus allows us to see how Butler’s theories, and theories of sameness more broadly, have been taken up within a neoliberal and postfeminist cultural context that valorises individualism and personal choice. Ascribing Hubert an agency to seemingly act beyond the existing sex and gender expectations of the time (by allowing him to identify as a man, without any apparent feelings of the loss or confusion felt by Albert),

however, disregards Butler’s nuanced arguments about agency and the performativity of gender; Butler argues that

the account of agency conditioned by those very regimes of discourse/power cannot be conflated within voluntarism or individualism, much less with consumerism, and in no way presupposes a choosing subject.\textsuperscript{79}

In other words, any discussion of the performativity of gender needs to be accompanied by an understanding that while individuals may have agency, that agency is heavily constrained by existing expectations of gender and appropriately sexed bodies and power structures. Thus while the film evinces an engagement with Butler’s theories, Hubert’s significantly expanded role and relatively unproblematised gender performance arguably overwrites Butler’s work with a postfeminist logic.

**Conclusion**

Taken together, *The Duchess* and *Albert Nobbs* draw our attention to the complex and contradictory ways that the female body is conceptualised in contemporary western popular culture, and this can be illustrated through analysis of the films’ deployment of the feminist tropes of corsetry and rape. Both tropes work to position the audience to adopt a feminist sensibility regarding the content of the film; indeed, by virtue of their presence, a feminist rhetoric is evoked, as both corsetry and rape have long been associated with feminist action for women’s liberation. How these tropes interact with the feminist approaches to bodily difference that are also evident within each film, however, reflects the unresolved and complex nature of the debates about sameness and difference that continue to circulate in feminist thought.

This analysis has also worked to complicate Gill’s notion of postfeminism’s approach to the body as being framed by a “resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference.”\textsuperscript{80} While the depiction of female bodies in popular culture is often constructed according to conservative postfeminist rhetoric, these films have shown how postfeminist approaches to the body, at least within postfeminist historical women’s films, can also facilitate both progressive and constructed depictions of the female body. Given that postfeminism features, according to the definition deployed

\textsuperscript{80} Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149.
within this research, “an entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes,” it seems that the unresolved tensions within feminist theories – epitomised by the sameness/difference debate – can also be translated to postfeminist rhetoric, alongside the more “resolved” feminist positions, such as liberal and socialist feminisms. This chapter thus indicates that postfeminist rhetoric can, at times, mirror feminist perspectives relatively accurately, and in ways that complicate, rather than simplify, women’s popular cultural texts.

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Chapter Five: “I Would Die for Him, But I Won’t Live Like This For Him”:
Relationality, Care and Dependence in Bride of the Wind and Anna Karenina

While the previous chapter considered how the sameness/difference debate manifests as competing approaches to the body in The Duchess and Albert Nobbs, this chapter explores how the prevalence of ideas of “sameness” within popular culture, particularly the valorisation of individualistic autonomy, in order to obscure the radical potential of care feminism in postfeminist historical women’s films. Built on recognition of the political possibilities of difference, care feminism is a theoretical position that, through its attention to the necessity and centrality of care to a functioning society, challenges the very concepts of individualism and self-sufficiency that shape western capitalist democracies. While the theoretical concerns of care feminism have certainly lingered within the academy, this strand of feminism has not been as readily replicated within postfeminist popular culture as other strands of feminist thought. Indeed, the radical core of care feminism is markedly absent from postfeminist popular culture, with most depictions of care ultimately mediated through a paradigm of individualism and individualist subjectivity.

There are two types of postfeminist historical women’s film in which this mediation of care through narratives of individualism becomes particularly evident: the female friendship film and the adulterous mother film. Female friendship films offer perhaps the most positive depictions of care within this subgenre, prioritising supportive relationships between adult women that facilitate personal growth and transformation. Mike Newell’s Mona Lisa Smile (2003) is a quintessential film of this type, and a brief analysis of it suggests how care is popularly understood within the

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1 This dialogue is taken from Joe Wright’s 2012 adaptation of Anna Karenina, when Anna declares to her husband that she is not willing to give up her lover for her son.
postfeminist historical women’s film. Building on this analysis, the rest of the chapter explores how adulterous mother films – identified here as films which feature as their protagonist a married woman who has borne her husband’s child prior to embarking upon an affair – present a more ambiguous and difficult engagement with both depictions of care and notions of relational subjectivity. Taking Joe Wright’s *Anna Karenina* (2012) and Bruce Beresford’s *Bride of the Wind* (2001) as its focus, this chapter accordingly draws attention to how the dependency of children within these films is repeatedly obscured in favour of narratives of personal autonomy and independence.

**Competing Subjectivities**

Underpinned by a logic of sameness, the prioritisation of autonomy and individualism has been an enduring theme in feminist history and has had significant ramifications for the ways that feminists have approached questions of equality. As explored more fully in chapter one, the strategic deployment of discourses of individualism and rationality as an intervention into patriarchal institutions has been particularly fruitful for feminist approaches to both subjectivity and notions of equality. Importantly, this approach “assume[s] a theory of self in which people are isolated, in which the self is prior to its activities and to its connections with others.”

In other words, the ideal rational self is seen as a separate, fully-formed entity that exists independently of, and prior to contact with, others. Within such perspectives, relationships with others are cast as a choice, rather than a necessity or an inevitability, with ideal relationships not curtailing the autonomy of either party; as Virginia Held has persuasively argued, “the ideal of autonomy makes suspect relationships that are permanent and not chosen.” Significantly, this notion of the self as separate is socially coded as masculine, while its opposite, a relational self that is

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predicated on the maintenance of relationships with others, is coded as feminine. Supported and perpetuated by the psychoanalytic theory of Freud, forming an identity of the self-as-separate is understood to indicate the male subject’s successful separation from the mother, while a self-as-relational identity is understood to indicate the female’s failure to fully separate from the mother.⁶ Within orthodox psychoanalysis then, the relational, feminine self has been understood as a “failed” subjectivity.

When the “successful” subject is understood as always separate from the other, however, there is a resultant anxiety about dependence, where dependence (either becoming dependent, or being responsible for a dependent) is depicted as a threat to the self, as a curbing of one’s autonomy, and thus “a failure of subjectivity.”⁷ As Rita Manning has somberly noted, “[i]t is shameful to admit to a need, it is shameful to respond to a need.”⁸ In order to defray this anxiety about, and thus deny the realities of, dependence, neoliberal forms of governance and rhetoric assume autonomy to be the norm for all citizens, even when that cannot be the case.⁹ Indeed, as Grace Clement has argued,

one of the main reasons we need to care for others is because they are not autonomous, and a great many of our caring relationships are with individuals who are not autonomous.¹⁰

There is thus a collective squeamishness around dependence which is also extended towards relational concepts of selfhood. Given that both dependence and relationality indicate a threat to normative concepts of the self-as-separate, they must therefore be disavowed within the neoliberal public sphere.

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⁹ See: Clement, *Care, Autonomy, and Justice*, 31.

¹⁰ Clement, *Care, Autonomy, and Justice*, 31.
Autonomy and Motherhood

The incompatibility between conceptions of the self as separate and feminist approaches to care becomes evident when considering the approaches of liberal and/or sameness feminism to motherhood. Importantly, within this approach, motherhood is made meaningful in the same way as an individual subjectivity: through the concept of autonomy. Autonomy, as explained by Clement, is “self-determination, or doing what an individual has decided to do . . . without the interference of outside influences or other people.” Given that motherhood involves caring for dependents, however, the possibilities of “doing what [one] has decided to do . . . without the interference of outside influences” become remarkably reduced, as the needs of the child must always be taken into account. Theorists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir, however, have argued that the deployment of autonomy within the mother-child relationship ultimately makes for a better mother; Wollstonecraft, for example, argued in 1792 that “[t]o be a good mother – a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands.” Similarly, de Beauvoir posited that “[e]ven in cases where the child is a treasure within a happy or at least balanced life, he cannot be the full extent of his mother’s horizons.” While such perspectives may retain their incisive edge, and can be strategically deployed to intervene in expectations of “patriarchal motherhood” or “new momism,” such an approach fails to interrogate the tensions between striving for autonomy and individualism and the realities of caring for a dependent, and ultimately reveals, as Patrice DiQuinzio has argued, the

11 Clement, Care, Autonomy, and Justice, 15.
12 Clement, Care, Autonomy, and Justice, 15.
14 de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, 582.
“impossib[ility] [of] theoris[ing] motherhood in terms of an individualist theory of subjectivity.”

The ways that these incompatibilities between motherhood and an autonomous subjectivity manifest on a societal level is explored at length in Julie Stephens’ compelling articulation of postmaternalism. Identified as “a process where the ideals intimately bound up with the practices of mothering are disavowed in the public sphere and conflicted in the private,”19 postmaternal thinking increasingly figures motherhood as the concern of the individual, and thus divorced from broader societal concerns. While motherhood has, since the transition to early capitalism, “inevitably involved a conflict between social and individualist aspirations,”20 postmaternal thinking pushes this conflict into new, public territory, as individualist aspirations now require the disavowal of motherhood, and the assumption of gender-neutral autonomy.21 This sidelining of both motherhood and conceptions of “the maternal” into the private sphere thus works to depoliticise the possibilities of care and relational notions of selfhood that motherhood necessarily entails.

**Care Theory**

Intervening in this assumption of individualism and autonomy, and interrogating the tensions of juggling individualism and the realities of care, is care feminism. Care feminist theory is typically recognised as an alternative moral theory that, as Joan Tronto has argued, “challenges the view that morality starts where rational and autonomous individuals confront each other to work out the rules of moral life.”22 Rather than “starting with an assumption of human separateness,”23 care theory presupposes the ontological view that the self is socially constituted or defined through its relationship to others. According to this view,

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18 DiQuinzio, *The Impossibility of Motherhood*, xii.
all individuals, not just those who accept the ethic of care, are socially constituted.\textsuperscript{24}

By focusing instead on the ways that “all individuals . . . are socially constituted,”\textsuperscript{25} as well as how care functions both formally and informally in society, care ethicists thus expose the impossibility of the unencumbered individual. Martha Nussbaum, for example, calls this assumption of independence the “the fiction of competent adulthood,”\textsuperscript{26} while Eva Feder Kittay draws attention to the many hidden dependencies of the allegedly autonomous and self-sufficient individual who is, in reality, dependent on others for the production of . . . food . . . mobility, for a multitude of tasks that make it possible for each of us to function in our work and daily living.\textsuperscript{27}

Within a care feminist perspective, then, we are all dependent on someone for something: if not now, then earlier in our lives, and most likely later in our lives. Given this centrality of dependence to the human life cycle, and the concomitant reliance on caring, both paid and unpaid, required to respond to these dependencies, the theorising of care thus necessarily encompasses both dependency and relational subjectivities, as well as the practise of care more broadly.

As a practice, caring “is a thoughtful, intentional work,”\textsuperscript{28} that involves “both giving and receiving and the expectation of some sort of reciprocation,”\textsuperscript{29} “some kind of on-going responsibility and commitment,”\textsuperscript{30} and “pay[ing] attention to the concrete other in his or her real situation.”\textsuperscript{31} There is a focus on the subject of care as an

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Clement, \textit{Care, Autonomy, and Justice}, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Clement, \textit{Care, Autonomy, and Justice}, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 267-268. See also: Fisher and Tronto, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” 39.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Tronto, “Women and Caring,” 173.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Manning, \textit{Speaking from the Heart}, xiv.
\end{itemize}
individual, as having particular needs that cannot be met through generalised abstractions or assumptions. Significantly, each of these criteria indicate the core argument that caring is not an innate characteristic to women; rather, it is the performance of certain behaviours and labour in service of another. Care theories also recognise the pervasiveness of care throughout society, and work to reaffirm both its necessity and its radical potential for reimagining social relations.

While early care feminists initially juxtaposed conceptions of autonomy with the realities of care, later theories have recognised the “relational features of autonomy,”32 and explore the interrelationship between care and autonomy. Held, for example, has persuasively argued that “[a]utonomy is exercised within social relations . . . [and] social cooperation is required as a precondition of autonomy.”33 In other words, autonomy is considered by care feminists to be a learned state, rather than the already-achieved state assumed within individualist discourses. When taken from such a perspective, the achievement of autonomy is built on a foundation of care, and then acts as a point from which the network of care continues. By this I mean that once individuals have learned to be autonomous, they are then able to recognise and fulfil (in a variety of ways) roles as members of a broader care network. Notions of autonomy are thus central to the practice of care, for it is only as an autonomous agent that one is able to perform an appropriate form of care for another.34

Importantly, far from simply romanticising the experience of caring for others, feminist scholars also seek to draw attention to the ways that care functions both inside and outside the dominant narratives of a society, and how a relational subjectivity can both benefit and challenge the care practitioner. Tronto, for example, questions “[h]ow much must one regard one’s own needs in order to be sufficiently attentive?” and suggests that “attentiveness [to another] involves a commitment of time and effort that may be made at a high price to the self.”35 Clement also acknowledges that “caring relationships are often damaging to either the caregiver or

33 Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 87, 85. See also: DiQuinzio, *The Impossibility of Motherhood*, 122; Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 266; Manning, *Speaking from the Heart*, 97; Clement, *Care, Autonomy, and Justice*, 24.
34 See: Clement, *Care, Autonomy and Justice*, 37.
to the recipient of care, and that threats to autonomy are a central form of this damage.” Furthermore, Chris Beasley and Carol Bacchi have argued that “the asymmetry at the heart of the political vision of care ethics . . . leaves in place [the] active independent self/citizen of neo-liberalism, who is distinguished from dependent others.” This is an important perspective, and careful critiques of the ways power, independence and dependence intersect are key to thoughtful engagement with care. However, I would also contend that care feminism troubles this binary, making visible the interdependencies that structure western societies, as well as the porosity of the categories “dependent” and “independent.” Indeed, despite these valid issues, caring is, and will remain, a central part of any society, whether it is socially acknowledged or not. At their most basic, practices and theories of care seek to ensure “that no one is left alone,” and thus refuses the isolation encouraged by concepts of the self as separate. Indeed, caring gains its significance, particularly in light of postmaternal and postfeminist priorities, through the way it offers potentially radical alternatives for reimagining ourselves as responsible to each other, rather than responsible only for ourselves.

**Care on Film**

Despite this radical potential, or perhaps because of it, care feminism is relatively absent within the postfeminist historical women’s film. Rather than depicting care as a feminist practice, many of the films in this subgenre instead present care simply as an expression of women’s relationality. This becomes particularly evident through the way postfeminist historical women’s films often prioritise adult relationships over the mother-child relationship. This focus on adult relationships is significant for the way it works to sideline questions of dependency, and thus obscure interventions into what it means to juggle care and autonomy within contemporary western society. Importantly, this prioritisation of adult relationships as the domain of giving and receiving care is not limited to one type of postfeminist historical women’s film; rather, it is evident in both female friendship films and adulterous mother films.

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36 Clement, *Care, Autonomy, and Justice*, 27.
These types of films have very different narratives – the female friendship film prioritises the bonds of friendship between adult women, while the adulterous mother film tends to prioritise the search for autonomy by women in loveless marriages – yet both deploy remarkably similar depictions of care as the domain of adult friendships. Certainly, that adulterous mother films are so silent about the demand for care involved in motherhood makes explicit the limited cultural scripts we have available to explore the realities of care in women’s lives. This chapter is thus separated into two sections: the first explores how female friendship is depicted as arising between autonomous adults within Mike Newell’s *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), while the second explores how the realities of motherhood are often sidelined in favour of narratives of personal autonomy, heterosexual romance and idealised femininity within Joe Wright’s *Anna Karenina* (2012) and Bruce Beresford’s *Bride of the Wind* (2000).

Care, Relationality and Female-Friendship Films

The female-friendship film has a significant role to play within the postfeminist historical women’s film subgenre. Karen Hollinger, in her influential study of the female-friendship film, has explained that female-friendship films are

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\text{a recently developed subgenre of the woman’s film [that] are specifically directed to a female audience . . . centre on the actions and emotions of a female protagonist(s), and . . . deal with issues of particular interest to women.}^{39}
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Such narratives also displace the heterosexual romance narrative, arguably indicating a radical potential to celebrate more relational forms of subjectivity, and to articulate feminist theories of care. Indeed, as Brenda Cooper has argued, “film narratives depicting women as friends rather than rivals can be read as representing a text that resists patriarchal definition and male objectification.”^{40}

Such films also, through their depiction of the friendships between adult women, reflect neoliberal market values; as Fisher and Tronto have compellingly argued, “the friendship model mirrors the marketplace: individuals come together as equals and

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stay together as long as this serves their mutual advantage.” Such a model assumes that relationality and care primarily occurs between rational, consenting adults who are able to reciprocate any care that is received. Given that, as Tronto has argued, “relationships between the caretakers and those cared for are often relations between unequals, where some amount of dependency exists,” female-friendship films can be seen to provide a deradicalised version of care and relationality that broadly shores up postfeminist and neoliberal narratives of individualism.

However, films that privilege female friendship also provide a cultural space for the complexities of female friendship to be celebrated, explored, and critiqued. Alison Winch has argued that female friendship films (or “girlfriend flicks,” as she characterises them), do important cultural work for the ways that they depict both the positives and negatives of female friendship. She argues that within these films, “female friends supply significant emotional and moral support, playing a fundamental role in validating each other’s identities,” while also [d]epict[ing] conflict, pain, and betrayal acted out between women and, in doing so . . . offer[s] the female viewer a cathartic space to explore the complexities of women’s relationships.

In other words, female-friendship films “do” relationality, and to a lesser extent, care feminism; by presenting female characters who both benefit from and struggle with the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, these films open a space through which to consider what it means to be connected to other people through friendship. As such, these films work to unpick the neoliberal notion that the self is best conceived of as a separate entrepreneurial actor, instead prioritising the potentially radical notion that the maintenance of important relationships is significant to the well-being of the individual.

Mike Newell’s (2003) Mona Lisa Smile is a particularly effective example of the female-friendship film. The film centres around five female protagonists – four

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44 Winch, “We Can Have It All,” 71.
students and one teacher – at the prestigious Wellesley college, and follows them through the 1953-1954 school year as they struggle with relationships, the possibilities of careers, and the questioning of traditional gender roles. While the relationships between the women are not, as Cooper has posited, “flawless,” the characters are nevertheless ultimately supportive of each other, and the film’s narrative seeks to “foreground [the protagonists’] connection to each other, not to . . . men.” The film thus challenges the status quo that traditionally sees female characters as having one-dimensional, romance-based interests. Indeed, the way Mona Lisa Smile structures the various friendships of these films and their attendant struggles around the women as individuals, rather than around the scenario of women fighting for the same man, allows the friendships to ebb and flow around the women’s personal growth, and thus works to privilege female friendships and notions of relationality over the heterosexual romance narratives that weave throughout each film.

While the film focuses on five female protagonists, it is through exploring the initially difficult, but ultimately supportive, relationship between two of these characters, Betty Warren (Kirsten Dunst) and Giselle Levy (Maggie Gyllenhaal), that the complexities of female friendship become evident. When Betty and Giselle first interact, they are in an Art History class at Wellesley College. The first class sees Giselle make a snide remark about Betty, which escalates in the next class. Upon being presented with a slide of Soutine’s Carcass, and asked by teacher Katherine Anne Watson (Julia Roberts) “Is it any good?” the following brief exchange occurs:

GISELLE: I think there’s something aggressive about it. And erotic.
BETTY: To you, everything is erotic.
GISELLE: Everything is erotic.

Shortly after, the class is shown an image of a cow painted by a young Katherine, and the students are asked “what makes art?”

BETTY: Art isn’t art until someone says it is.
KATHERINE: It’s art!
BETTY: The right people.
KATHERINE: Who are they?
GISELLE: Betty Warren. We’re so lucky to have one right here.

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45 Cooper, “‘Chick Flicks’ as Feminist Texts,” 295. See also: Winch, “We Can Have It All,” 71, 77.
46 Cooper, “‘Chick Flicks’ as Feminist Texts,” 294-295.
BETTY: Screw you.

From these brief interactions between Betty and Giselle, it is obvious that the two women have different priorities and beliefs. Betty judges Giselle for her openly expressed sexuality, and Giselle in turn judges Betty for her pretentiousness. As the film progresses, and the film begins to focus more on the core group of students (Betty, Giselle, Joan [Julia Stiles] and Connie [Ginnifer Goodwin]), it becomes evident that despite their oppositional politics and morals, the two spend a significant amount of time together with their group of mutual friends. There is often antagonism between the two – with Betty often cast as the judgmental, blunt and spiteful “frenemy”47 who lords her impending nuptials as evidence of her social superiority over the rest of the group – however, neither is willing to give up her friendships with the other girls in order to be free of the other. Their relationship consequently indicates the complexity of female friendships and the influence of a subjectivity informed by relationality. Indeed, rather than seeking to separate from the problematic other, both Betty and Giselle are tolerant of each other in order to protect the bonds of friendship that bind the four girls, thus reflecting Clement’s argument that “care has two interrelated priorities: maintaining one’s relationships and meeting the needs of those to whom one is connected.”48 In order to maintain their connections with Joan and Connie, Giselle and Betty must thus contain their animosity, and attempt to coexist relatively peacefully within the wider bonds of female relationality that structure the dormitories.

The tenor of their relationship changes towards the end of the film, however, when Betty screams at Giselle for being a whore for sleeping with a married man, and then breaks down and confesses that her marriage is failing. Given that Giselle has recently seen Betty’s husband kissing another woman, she soon realises that Betty’s tirade – “It must be torturous running after a man who doesn’t even care about you, who’s in love with someone else, who hates you. He hates you!” – is less about Giselle’s promiscuity and more about Betty’s own crushingly empty marriage. Rather


48 Clement, Care, Autonomy, and Justice, 14.
than walking away as she initially plans to when the tirade begins (“I’m gonna meet you downstairs”), Giselle holds Betty in a tight hug that allows Betty to sobbingly confess the state of her marriage: “He doesn’t want me. He doesn’t sleep with me.” Knowing that Betty needs to express her feelings and to grieve for the state of her marriage, Giselle puts her own needs (to not be verbally abused) aside in order to support Betty’s needs. Given that she is the only one who knows about Betty’s husband’s infidelity, Giselle arguably has “knowledge peculiar to the particular person being cared for,” and is thus the only one of the women who is able to, in this moment, give Betty what she needs.

This moment of bonding then apparently lays the foundation for a stronger friendship between the two, for in one of the film’s final scenes, Betty reveals to her mother at graduation that not only has she filed for divorce, but also that she will be living with Giselle post-college. This is despite the fact that other than the scene where Giselle cares for Betty, there are no scenes between the two characters that indicate their flourishing friendship; rather, there are ensemble scenes that indicate that the Art History class as a whole is finally thinking critically about art, and appreciating their departing teacher. Despite this lack of context, however, the previously difficult relationship between Giselle and Betty is refigured as a reliable relationship by the end of the film. Indeed, the tense connection between Giselle and Betty throughout the film always appears much more stable and enduring than either Betty’s relationship with her partner, Spencer, or Giselle’s multiple relationships with older and unavailable men, thus evoking the narrative of sisterhood that weaves throughout Made in Dagenham, as explored in chapter three. The strength of the bond between Betty and Giselle thus illustrates Hollinger’s argument that within female friendship films, “[w]omen’s friendships involve an intensity and depth not found in their relationships with men.” The friendship between the two women – initially as part of a group of four, but then as a significant relationship in and of itself – thus indicates the complexity, and necessity, of female friendships.

The importance of Giselle’s and Betty’s friendship is also arguably more pronounced due to the film’s historical setting. The film is set in the mid-1950s, and the conservatism of this period is made explicit in both the women’s personal lives,

50 Hollinger, In the Company of Women, 14.
and the priorities of Wellesley College. The College, for example, offers “speech, elocution and poise” classes, where the students are told by their teacher that a few years from now, your sole responsibility will be taking care of your husband and children . . . the grade that matters the most is the one he gives you, not me.

This notion that a woman’s role is subordinate to her husband is also enforced socially, as expressed by Betty’s mother. When Betty returns to her parents’ home in an attempt to leave the absent Spencer, her mother responds with “You’re going to turn around, go home, fix your face and wait for your husband. This is the bargain you made, Elizabeth. We all did.” There is an expectation of passivity within both of these examples that indicates women’s subordination in this period, both socially and institutionally. Betty is supposed to “wait” for her husband to return from his philandering, while the poise and elocution class makes clear that it is their husbands who will decide whether or not the women are executing their wifely duties appropriately. Given this context, wherein women’s needs are broadly considered second to their husbands’ wants, the radical potential of female friendships is perhaps more marked in historical films, as they undermine rigid gender roles that were both socially and institutionally entrenched. Indeed, it is Giselle’s assistance, particularly in terms of living arrangements, that aids Betty in divorcing Spencer; Giselle thus provides an alternative avenue of support – outside of her marriage or her conservative parents – that Betty can access in order to change her life. The historical setting of this film thus emphasises the significance of female friendships, which can be seen to act as a safety net when other relationships, whether familial or romantic, fail.

Furthermore, the historical setting of Mona Lisa Smile can also be read as offering a feminist reworking of traditional woman’s films’ plots, in which women were repeatedly pitted against each other. By locating positive female friendships in the past, such films are perhaps intervening in a history of women’s cinema that broadly considered women as each other’s enemies, particularly in their pursuit of men.51 While the friendships of Mona Lisa Smile are depicted in postfeminist terms – particularly those of empowerment and individualism, as Giselle’s support arguably

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empowers Betty to divorce her husband – they ultimately express women’s relationality as a positive and necessary step towards an independent and empowered subjectivity.

**Adulterous Mother Films**

While female friendship films “do” women’s relationality – albeit by depicting it as occurring between autonomous adults, and thus sidestepping questions of independence – adulterous mother films are more revealing of the tensions and ambiguities surrounding care within the postfeminist milieu. There are a significant number of postfeminist historical women’s films that feature an adulterous mother protagonist, including Bruce Beresford’s *Bride of the Wind* (2001), Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* (2006), Saul Dibb’s *The Duchess* (2008), Joe Wright’s *Anna Karenina* (2012), Sophie Barthes’ *Madame Bovary* (2015), and Todd Haynes’ *Carol* (2015). The adulterous mother film, focusing as it does on a female protagonist who does not engage in an extra-marital affair until after giving birth to her husband’s child, provides a unique opportunity through which to consider the ways that notions of care do and do not circulate within contemporary western society. The figure of the adulterous mother is significant given the challenge she poses to the notion of the autonomous individual who is able to “choos[e] projects and life plans without the inference of outside influences or other people,” as the narrative follows her struggle for autonomy and freedom from the stifling nature of the nuclear family and its emphasis on traditional gender roles. Indeed, it is this struggle that often forms the very basis of the narrative within such films.

Given that it is her role as a mother that often thwarts her ability to achieve autonomy, or anything resembling an autonomous state of being, the adulterous mother film might be expected to develop a more complex exploration of care and dependency, particularly as understood through a mother’s relationship with her children. Yet the adulterous mother films under examination appear to follow a similar pattern to the female friendship film, wherein care and relationality is depicted as occurring primarily between consenting and autonomous adults, and the realities of being in a dependent relationship with a child remain largely unaddressed. This is in

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52 Clement, *Care, Autonomy, and Justice*, 15.
stark contrast to films like *Erin Brockovich* and *Made in Dagenham*, both of which make explicit the struggle involved in caring for children while also having priorities outside of the home. Erin Brockovich, for example, misses her daughter’s first words while she is working in Hinkley, and Rita’s absence from the home while engaging in industrial action sees her husband Eddie burning the children’s dinner and struggling to iron their clothes. This sensitivity to the juggling of care and autonomy is perhaps due to the films’ socialist feminist sensibility, which relies on interrogating the material realities of working-class women to make meaning. Adulterous mother films, on the other hand, often depict protagonists of a higher social class, whose motivations are based on a bid for more personal autonomy. Indeed, far from challenging the postmaternal disavowal of care and dependence, these films arguably adhere to such a notion, obscuring the needs of the protagonists’ children and prioritising the central characters’ journeys to autonomy and individualism.

*Bride of the Wind*

The first film I will be analysing, Bruce Beresford’s *Bride of the Wind* (2001), is a biopic of Alma Mahler (Sarah Wynter), wife of composer Gustav Mahler (Jonathon Pryce) and successful composer in her own right. The film is based on Susan Keegan’s biography, *The Bride of the Wind*, and follows Alma as a headstrong (proto-feminist) young woman who falls in love with and marries Mahler. After the death of one of their daughters, Maria, Alma visits a health spa to recuperate and, while there, engages in an affair with a fellow patient, Walter Gropius (Simon Verhoeven). Upon her return, Mahler discovers her affair, and asks Alma to choose between himself and Gropius. She chooses her husband, and remains with him until his death. As a widow, Alma then embarks upon a passionate, and ultimately stifling, relationship with the painter Oskar Kokoschka (Vincent Perez). Upon the termination of their relationship, Alma returns to and marries Gropius, and bears his child. However, while married to Gropius, Alma meets author Franz Werfel (Gregor Seberg), with whom it appears she has an affair, consequently leaving Gropius for Werfel. The audience are informed, at the end of the film, that

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We are therefore led to believe that Alma was ultimately faithful to Werfel, and that she achieved her greatest successes while in a partnership with him.

Care Between an Adult Daughter and Her Mother

This film, imbued as it is with both postmaternal and postfeminist thinking, is informed by two different approaches to care, both of which work to refigure care as the domain of adults, thus suppressing the particular vulnerabilities of the child. The first of these strategies is the figuring of the key mothering relationship in the film as between Alma and her own mother, rather than between Alma and her daughter. Privileging the mother-adult daughter relationship thus means that the film hinges on questions of Alma’s autonomy, and that any examinations of care become limited to adult relationships, as in the female friendship films discussed above.

This privileging of Alma’s relationship with her mother is particularly effective at obscuring questions of dependence through the way their relationship evokes the feminist trope of the mother-daughter relationship. This trope, mired as it is in expectations of intergenerational conflict between women, overwrites the realities of providing care for a dependent with the liberal feminist concern of achieving personal autonomy. The first scene in which the adult daughter-mother relationship evinces conflict about Alma’s autonomy is when she is newly engaged to Gustav Mahler, who has requested that Alma promise that she will give up composing when they are married. Before agreeing, a dismayed Alma discusses this proposition with her mother,

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Anna, in a scene that makes explicit the struggle that defines the rest of the film: the tension between care and autonomy.

ANNA: What is it? What’s happened?
ALMA: He asked if I would give up my life for him.
ANNA: He’s speaking metaphorically.
ALMA: No, Mama, he’s speaking honestly.
ANNA: But what can he possibly mean?
ALMA: He says if we marry I’ll have to give up composing.
ANNA: I never thought my acting career mattered that much. Not that your father actually asked me to give up the stage. It just happened that way.
ALMA: But what are you saying, Mama? That you’re sorry you married my father?
ANNA: No, nothing quite as simple as that. . . . Perhaps what I’m saying is that men and women are different. Do you think one of us could ask anyone to give up something so important? Of course not. We know what it is to relinquish part of ourselves. To husbands, to children – their lives become our lives. One day we realise we are only half awake. But it’s too late.
ANNA: You are very young. You’ll find another lover. Nothing will ever replace your music.

This scene foregrounds the identifiably feminist rhetoric that weaves throughout the film. Alma’s mother is specifically decrying the gendered nature of sacrifice that occurs within marriage, and is attempting to dissuade Alma from experiencing the same “half-awake” life that she presumably has herself led. Anna’s identification that her giving up of her stage career was not asked of her, but still sacrificed, reflects Clement’s assertion that

[i]t is deceptive to say that women choose to sacrifice their careers in favour of their family responsibilities. Rather, women’s (unchosen) role as primary caregivers in the family dictates that they sacrifice their careers in favour of their family responsibilities. The inequality
of women’s unpaid care work undermines their autonomy not only within but outside the family.\(^{55}\)

Indeed, while Alma’s father may never have asked Anna to give up her singing career, the fact that “it just happened that way” indicates that he did not need to, that social expectations of the time did it for him. Anna’s frustration with the fact that women are expected to relinquish whatever is necessary in the service of others also echoes the critiques presented against care theories; as Clement has argued,

> the ethic of care is less a creation of women than an unjust demand upon women, as it requires women to take care of men and men’s interests at the expense of themselves and their own interests. . . .

\[^{56}\] The ethic of care compromises the autonomy of the caregiver.

Importantly, this exchange positions Alma and Anna as ideological others, evoking the mother-daughter relationship central to popular narratives of recent feminist history.\(^{57}\) The mother-daughter relationship, in terms of feminist history, positions second-wave feminists and feminists from the 1960s and 1970s as the “mothers” of the third-wave “daughters,” identified by Astrid Henry as feminisms and feminists from the 1990s and 2000s.\(^{58}\) Significantly, this scene, unlike the other scenes in which Alma and her mother interact, works to position Alma’s mother as holding particularly second-wave ideals, especially in terms of marriage. Her lament that women are expected to sacrifice themselves unfairly to both husbands and children is reminiscent of Shulamith Firestone’s declaration that “[m]ore than ever [women] shoulder the brunt of the marriage.”\(^{59}\) Her declaration that “you’ll find another lover. Nothing will replace your music” also indicates a liberal feminist focus on the importance of women building careers, and the nurturing of women’s autonomy.\(^{60}\) Alma, apparently unconvinced by her mother’s arguments about sacrifice, and affirming her love for Mahler in the face of such arguments, is thus representative of

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\(^{55}\) Clement, *Care, Autonomy, and Justice*, 61 (italics in original).

\(^{56}\) Clement, *Care, Autonomy, and Justice*, 6.

\(^{57}\) Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, 2.

\(^{58}\) Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, 22.


the third-wave feminist daughter in conflict with her second-wave feminist mother. This initial positioning is significant for the rest of the women’s interactions; for, once in the position of the third-wave daughter, what other option does Alma have but to rebel?\textsuperscript{61}

The differing opinions held by Alma and her mother continue throughout the film. In a fictionalised scene that has no basis in the biography upon which the film was based, Alma explains her unhappiness with her marriage to her mother whom, given her opposition to the marriage initially, might have been expected to offer sympathy. This, however, is not the case:

ALMA: It’s taken me five years to get his accounts in order. He knows nothing about money, nothing. It flies out of the house to his sister, his parents, his whole family. And I can’t afford to buy clothes for myself.

ANNA: You’re being unreasonable, Alma.

ALMA: Am I? I thought you’d understand.

ANNA: I do, but there are responsibilities you agree to accept. Gustav’s work must come first. . . . Gustav has a great career, darling. You have a home, a famous husband, wonderful children. You’ve managed the finances so well, paid back his debts. Soon you will have your new dress, and anything else you want.

ALMA: And it will be too late.

This exchange is particularly important because Alma not only identifies the sacrifices she has had to make within this relationship, but she also refers back to her discussion with her mother about how being a woman who cares for another could be a burden so heavy that one could lose oneself.\textsuperscript{62} Despite acknowledging that she understands Alma’s position, her mother suggests that as entering into this relationship was Alma’s choice, it is Alma’s individual responsibility to maintain this behaviour. Surprisingly within this scene, it appears that Alma’s mother has experienced an ideological about-face. Indeed, it is almost as if the women have switched places: Alma, previously enticed by her love to give up her autonomy, now chafes at the constraints placed

\textsuperscript{61} See: Henry, \textit{Not My Mother’s Sister}, 126.

upon her, while her mother, previously lamenting the inequality and “half-awake” life facing married women, now professes the importance of standing by her choices. The point of contact between the two scenes, however, linking the two women not only to their previous ideals, but to the ideals of the other, is the repetition of the line “and it will be too late.” Alma’s mimicry of her mother’s lament thus arguably links the women in both genetics and feminist critique, shoring up the mother-daughter trope in feminist history.

Caring Via Heterosexual Romance

Dependent care relationships are also sidelined through the way the film depicts ideal performances of care as occurring within the heterosexual romantic relationship. When the heterosexual romance is taken as the driving force of the narrative, the film can be read as Alma seeking and then asserting her autonomy through finding the ideal romantic partner. In other words, Alma’s narrative indicates how the fantasy of personal autonomy is primarily resolved through the ideal heterosexual romance, a fantasy explained by Janice Radway as

a ritual wish to be cared for, loved, and validated . . . [by] a man who is capable of the same attentive observation and intuitive ‘understanding’ that . . . women regularly accord to men.63

This romantic fantasy is epitomised by Alma’s final relationship with Franz Werfel, as Alma’s composing is finally extended the same nurturing and support that she has offered to all of her partners’ artistic and creative endeavours. The benefits of Werfel’s support of Alma are made explicit within the second last scene of the film when Franz is discovered playing Alma’s music:

FRANZ: I found some of your music, Alma. You shouldn’t have stopped composing. Your songs are –
ALMA: Immature. So much time has passed. I’m too old to start again.
FRANZ: No. Your music is wonderful.
ALMA: Is it? Isn’t it too complex?
FRANZ: It’s you, Alma. It’s passionate, it’s charming, it’s exciting.

Considering that the scene following this exchange is of Alma’s music being performed at Brahms Hall in 1919, the audience are encouraged to believe that it is Franz’s love and support that has finally allowed Alma to assert her autonomy and compose the music she always desired. This relationship thus demonstrates Clement’s argument that

autonomy cannot be achieved individually. In fact, we learn to become autonomous, and we learn this competency not through isolation from others, but through relationships with others. . . . An individual’s autonomy is nurtured through the care of others.  

The happy ending of this film thus works to affirm the logic that caring relationships occur between autonomous adults in a heterosexual relationship, and that caring allows for and encourages the autonomy of both partners equally.

This ending, however, also indicates the influence that postmaternal and postfeminist thinking have had on the film’s production, as the film’s depiction of Alma and Franz’s relationship is strikingly different to that recorded within the biopic’s source text. Published in 1991, the biography is arguably neither a postmaternal nor a postfeminist text. While the film ends happily, suggesting that Franz encouraged Alma to publish her songs and be finally recognised for her talent, the biography tells a markedly different tale. Firstly, according to Keegan, Alma’s songs were published in 1911, as a result of Mahler’s encouragement, not Franz’s, who she had not yet met.  

Significantly, this encouragement occurred after Alma’s affair with Gropius, when Mahler was attempting to atone for his prior marital indifference. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, Alma’s relationship with Franz was, according to Keegan, hardly ideal. Alma’s casual anti-Semitism (understandably) caused political differences with her Jewish husband and, according to Keegan, Alma also engaged in an extramarital affair with a priest during her marriage to Franz. The fact that the filmmakers chose not to include this part of Alma’s life suggests that Alma’s

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64 Clement, Care, Autonomy, and Justice, 24. See also: Manning, Speaking from the Heart, 103.
65 See: Keegan, The Bride of the Wind, xiii, 162.
67 Keegan has argued that “[l]ater in life Alma Mahler maintained the right to be as outspokenly anti-Semitic as the mood took her, on the grounds that she had had two Jewish husbands,” and that “in effect, it was she who decided who was Jewish.” See: Keegan, The Bride of the Wind, 77, 88.
relationship with Franz was idealised within the film, in order to shore up fantasies of women’s self-realisation as achievable through an equal romantic partnership.

Absent Children

The influence of postmaternal thinking within this film is also evident through the relative absence of Alma’s children. Indeed, despite giving birth to four children Alma is rarely depicted in a meaningful relationship with any of her children. While there are of course brief scenes in which Alma engages with her dependent children – one example is when Alma cares for her eldest daughter Maria when she has diphtheria – these scenes are few and far between. Alma’s second eldest daughter, Anna, is used most frequently to represent Alma’s role as a mother, while her daughter Manon and son Martin are not given any screen time, and thus for all intents and purposes, are excluded from the narrative. Despite her role as the “representative” child, however, Anna is still remarkably absent from the film. This absence can perhaps be explained by the fact that Alma was an upper-class white woman, with the resources to finance the outsourcing of her family’s childcare responsibilities. Indeed, the fact that both Alma and Anna from Anna Karenina rely on nannies, governesses and tutors (staff who appear in several scenes in both films, in order to demonstrate the separation between mother and child) to provide primary care for their children is, in some ways, a convenient plot mechanism by which the children can be “accounted for” without disrupting the films’ postfeminist priorities of autonomy and empowerment. That the children are being cared for by someone else frees up Alma (and Anna) to prioritise a quest for personal autonomy.

Another explanation for the absence of Alma’s children within Bride of the Wind is offered by the film’s status as an adaptation of Keegan’s biography which, as it is made clear in the film’s acknowledgments, was written with the help of Anna. Given that she was estranged from her mother for eight years, and even when not estranged their relationship could best be described as “difficult,” it is perhaps unsurprising that Anna’s character in the biopic is relatively sidelined.

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72 Keegan, The Bride of the Wind, xi.
Yet the film’s status as a biopic does not wholly account for Anna’s absence, for even difficult relationships arguably engage in some meaningful way with notions of care and dependency (and perhaps the ways that care has failed within a particular relationship). Instead, it is arguably (at least partially) the influence of postmaternal thinking that leaves this film unable to account for Alma and Anna’s relationship, and Alma’s role as a mother more broadly. Indeed, Alma’s striving to achieve unencumbered autonomy means that there is no ideological space with which to engage meaningfully with her role as a mother, a role that simultaneously denies her access to the neoliberal and postfeminist fantasy of “self as separate.” The film’s struggle to make sense of dependent relationships thus renders Anna as little more than a narrative prop, used to, as Karen Lury has identified, “reveal the strangeness of the world in which [she] live[s].” 73 Notably, this lack of accountability to the presence of children has arguably intensified since the release of Bride of the Wind; Sophie Barthes’ 2015 adaptation of Madame Bovary, for example, ignores motherhood altogether. Despite the fact that Flaubert’s text sees Emma Bovary give birth to a daughter prior to embarking on her affairs, 74 Barthes’ adaptation excludes this subplot, thus prioritising, and indeed simplifying, Emma’s doomed search for personal autonomy.

Importantly, however, Anna’s role of “child as prop” has potentially subversive narrative effects. This is most evident within one of the final scenes of the film, when Anna asks Alma:

ANNA: Why won’t you marry Uncle Franz, Mama?
ALMA: Perhaps I will someday, Anna.
ANNA: When?
ALMA: Do you love him so much?
ANNA: He loves you so much.
ALMA: What difference does it make? It’s as if we’re already married.
ANNA: Is he going to leave us? Are you going to send him away?
ALMA: Whatever made you think that? Oh, I haven’t given you much reason to believe I’d stay with him, or any other man, have I?

74 See: Gustav Flaubert, Madame Bovary: A Study of Provincial Life (New York: Brentano’s, 1919), 86.
Within this particular exchange, Anna appears to act as the moral compass of the film; Alma’s unconventional romantic life has created a sense of insecurity for her daughter, and Anna’s questioning positions Alma to consider, perhaps for the first time, how her actions have impacted upon her daughter. Indeed, this exchange suggests that, as a result of Alma’s multiple relationships, her daughter feels a sense of instability, and desires her mother to be married so that Anna is sure about the strength, and thus stability, of the relationship.

Significantly, the film seems to be suggesting that Alma’s prioritisation of her own autonomy has had a negative impact on her daughter. This is particularly evident within the film’s epilogue:

Anna, the daughter of Alma and Gustav Mahler, achieved acclaim as a sculptor. She married five times. She died in 1988. (Manon, Alma’s daughter with Walter Gropius, died at the age of 19).

This reference to Anna’s five marriages in the film’s epilogue is striking, and has arguably been included to encourage the audience to adopt a particular reading of both Anna’s and her mother’s lives. Given that this final epilogue follows immediately after the exchange between Alma and Anna explored above, the narrative facilitates a direct link between the sense of instability felt by a young Anna, and her subsequent multiple marriages. In this way, the film adheres to the trope identified by Bill Overton in his studies of female adultery novels: that “the wages of adultery dog the daughter as well as her mother.”

According to the logic of this trope, the value-laden mention of Anna’s five marriages in the epilogue to Bride of the Wind thus acts as a kind of “proof” that Alma’s search for autonomy through heterosexual romance has impacted negatively on her daughter, as to have been married five times is broadly considered to be unusual, if not openly derogated. Of course, the deployment of this trope can be read conservatively or through a care feminist framework. Within a conservative reading, Alma’s prioritisation of her own desires can be read as selfish, and failing her daughter’s need for stability. On the other hand, the relationship between Alma and her young daughter can also be seen as challenging postmaternal narratives of self-as-

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separate, given that Anna appears to be the one who suffers the consequences of Alma’s desire for postfeminist individualism.

Anna Karenina

The complex relationship between personal autonomy, care and motherhood is also reflected within Joe Wright’s Anna Karenina (2012), released eleven years after Bride of the Wind. Based on Leo Tolstoy’s novel of the same name, the film depicts the story of Anna Karenina (Keira Knightley), a married mother who embarks on a passionate, and ultimately destructive, affair with Count Vronsky (Aaron Taylor-Johnson). Set in nineteenth-century Imperial Russia, the film follows Anna as she visits Moscow to plead for her sister-in-law Dolly’s (Kelly McDonald) forgiveness on behalf of Anna’s philandering brother Stiva Oblonsky (Matthew Macfadyen). While at Dolly’s sister Kitty’s (Alice Vikander) debut ball, Anna meets Kitty’s then-suitor, Vronsky; they then begin a passionate affair, resulting in a pregnancy. Exiled from her husband Karenin’s (Jude Law) house, Anna is forbidden from seeing her son Serezha76 (Oliver McNamara). The loss of her son and her status within society leads Anna to cling desperately to Vronsky; and when he is unable to provide enough love to assuage her, she commits suicide by throwing herself in front of a train. This main plotline is interspersed with the story of Constantine Levin (Domnhall Gleeson), Kitty’s would-be suitor. After being rejected by Kitty, Levin returns to his country estate, and works side-by-side with the peasants. Upon hearing of Vronsky’s rejection of Kitty, Levin builds up the courage to rekindle their relationship, resulting in an idealised marriage and the birth of a child at the end of the film. While Bride of the Wind privileges the adult daughter-mother relationship over Alma’s relationships with her young children, and positions care in the domain of the heterosexual partnership, Anna Karenina arguably evades questions of dependence by taking as its focus the women who provide care, rather than the relationships of care themselves.

There are three main female characters within Anna Karenina: protagonist Anna, her sister-in-law Dolly, and Dolly’s sister Kitty. Taken together, these three characters indicate the ambiguous position care holds within contemporary western society, as

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76 The spelling of Serezha’s name differs markedly between versions of the original text and their adaptations. For ease of reference, I will be using the spelling found in Louise and Alymer Maude’s 2010 translation. See: Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, trans. Louise and Alymer Maude (London: Vintage, 2010 [1918]).
they each struggle to reconcile (to varying degrees) a search for autonomy with the relationships of care in which they are embedded. Anna is the character most focused on realising her autonomy through her relationship with Vronsky. As the protagonist, her narrative does not change significantly from novel to adaptation, as her motivation always remains independence and freedom from a loveless marriage. Wright’s depiction of Anna is quite similar to the source text. Dolly and Kitty’s motivations as secondary characters, however, are more easily altered through the process of adaptation, and thus provide a clearer understanding of the ideological concerns regarding individualistic autonomy and care that shape this adaption. Indeed, a closer examination of Dolly and Kitty indicates that the predominant discursive emphasis within this film is upon autonomy, and if care does occur, it is of an essentialist, conservative nature. The radical core of care feminism is thus absent within this film, and a more liberal feminist explanation of autonomy is prioritised.

Anna

As mentioned above, the motivations of Anna Karenina in this film are, for the most part, congruent with Tolstoy’s novel, with the source text and adaptation being particularly closely aligned in terms of dialogue. There is one particular scene, however, that illustrates the influence of postmaternal thinking on the production of the film as, in a scene reworked for this adaptation, Serezha is discussed through the lens of Anna’s desire for autonomy, rather than his need for care. At this point in the film, Anna has almost died whilst giving birth to Vronsky’s daughter and, after begging for Karenin’s forgiveness while delirious, has moved back into the marital home. Upon being informed of Vronsky’s imminent departure to Tashkent, Anna decides that if she is ever to see Vronsky again, it will not be to say good bye:

KARENIN: You would be lost. Irretrievably lost. You would have no position. And worse, if we divorce, you would be the guilty party. That means you cannot legally remarry. Your union with Count Vronsky would be illegitimate, as would your daughter, who now has the protection of my name. And this is what you want? It would be a sin to help you destroy yourself.

ANNA: You forget something. Count Vronsky and I love each other.

KARENIN: And this love sanctifies a criminal folly?
ANNA: All I know is that I sent him away and it’s as if I shot myself through the heart!

KARENIN: I see. And what of Serezha?

ANNA: I would die for him, but I won’t live like this for him. When he knows of love, he will forgive me.

Here, Anna’s lament evokes the rhetoric of de Beauvoir expressed above, that “it would obviously be better for the child if his mother was a complete person and not a mutilated one.” 77 While de Beauvoir explains how this completeness can be found through “work and her relations with the group,” 78 for Anna being without Vronsky’s love is a mutilation, and makes her a poor substitute for a mother. Here, then, Serezha’s need for care is sidelined in favour of Anna’s desire for autonomy and personal freedom.

Significantly, Anna’s discussion of Serezha relies on an abstraction of what she believes will be true of him in the future rather than his concrete needs now; this suggests the influence of not only the rhetoric of individualism, but also the ethic of justice which, as Clement has explained, takes as its primary focus . . . a set of abstract principles. In order to act justly in a particular situation we must abstract from the particular features of that situation to see how it comes under a general rule. 79

While abstracting has important ramifications for equality, in this particular situation it works to obscure the very real needs of the child at this particular point in his life. By framing her discussion of Serezha as he will be in the future, rather than how he is in the present, Anna thus ignores the fact that it is through care that we learn to be autonomous, and that her removal of her care for him may ultimately disrupt his journey to autonomous adulthood. 80 Significantly, this scene is an amalgamation of several episodes 81 within the novel where Anna and her husband broach the realities of her leaving him, none of which, however, mention Serezha. While his brief inclusion within this scene draws attention to the dependent caring relationship between

77 de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, 582.
78 de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, 582.
79 Clement, Care, Autonomy and Justice, 12.
80 See: Held, The Ethics of Care, 83-84; Manning, Speaking from the Heart, 97; DiQuinzio, The Impossibility of Motherhood, 122; Clement, Care, Autonomy, and Justice, 24.
81 See: chapters 20 and 22, Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, 500-502, 506-511.
mother and son, its reworking arguably evokes Serezha in order to affirm Anna’s search for individualistic autonomy through heterosexual love, rather than her embeddedness within a relationship of care. By talking about him through the lens of her own desires, Serezha becomes, like Anna in *Bride of the Wind*, a discursive prop, mobilised to draw attention to the ways that autonomy and heterosexual love are prioritised over care and dependency relations in contemporary western popular culture more broadly.

**Dolly**

Anna’s sister-in-law Dolly is also depicted through a lens of (failed) individualistic autonomy within this film, despite the fact that she has six children, whose livelihoods preoccupy her throughout Tolstoy’s novel. Indeed, the children rarely interact with Dolly within Wright’s adaptation, thus making her an important character through which to explore the absence of care, and even relationality, within this film more broadly. The depiction of Dolly within a framework of individualism is evident early in the film, when Anna firsts visits Dolly and her family in order to convince Dolly to take back the adulterous Stiva. Dolly is understandably upset within this exchange, as this is the first of Stiva’s affairs that she has found out about:

DOLLY: Well what about me? Does his remorse make it easier for me?

ANNA: I know you are suffering. But Dolly, you must tell me. Is there enough love left in your heart? Enough to forgive him?

DOLLY: Well when I think of them together, I can’t forgive him. No.

ANNA: My poor lamb. So you would rather accept your fate?

DOLLY: My fate? But I haven’t done anything! It’s him who –

ANNA: Do you love him Dolly? You love him, and he loves you. But you can’t forgive. So your lives must continue like this forever, with both of you wretched.

Here, Anna draws on the rhetoric of individualism in order to encourage Dolly to save the marriage. By asking Dolly if she “would rather accept her fate,” Anna portrays Dolly as passive, and even pitiable, for refusing to take the steps needed to re-establish her own happiness. This image of her as passive clearly distresses Dolly, as she initially seeks to re-establish that as she is not the one at fault, it is not her responsibility to
maintain the health of the relationship. However, Anna’s deployment of a framework of autonomy works to cast Dolly’s refusal to forgive Stiva as the absence of action, thereby calling Dolly’s autonomy into question. Furthermore, by calling Dolly her “poor lamb,” Anna constructs an image of Dolly as weak and dependent, relying on the care of others to improve her wellbeing. Anna is thus using language that is imbued with dependence in order to establish Dolly’s “failure of subjectivity”\(^\text{82}\); it is arguably these descriptors that push Dolly into actively forgiving her husband.

Importantly, the rewriting of this scene for the screenplay arguably also changes the meaning of the original episode within the novel. Tolstoy’s original text is as follows:

‘Everything is at an end, and that’s all,’ said Dolly. ‘And the worst of it is, you understand, that I can’t leave him: there are the children, and I am bound. Yet I can’t live with him; it is torture for me to see him.’\(^\text{83}\)

Here, Dolly makes clear that while she desires to leave Stiva, she cannot; there are the children to consider, as well as the social and legislative mores of the time that would have made her life after the divorce difficult, if not impossible. In contrast, the film makes no mention of the children, or the likely struggles that would have occurred had Dolly been able to leave Stiva, and instead focuses on Dolly as an individual, who is apparently only held back from leaving by the love she has for her philandering husband. This thus simplifies, and indeed individualises, Dolly’s marital issues with her husband.

This individualisation of Dolly’s subjectivity and approach to life is also seen in a later scene that has again been reworked from the novel, when Dolly visits Anna for the first time since she has left Karenin. The differences between the novel and the adaptation are particularly significant; where the novel focuses on Dolly’s preoccupation with her children’s livelihoods, the film instead constructs Dolly as a woman who happens to have children, rather than a woman who is in charge of caring for multiple dependent children. Within the novel Dolly, while staying with the now married Kitty and Levin, travels to visit Anna and Vronsky at their new villa. It is during the trip to visit Anna that Dolly has the time and space to think, and her thoughts inevitably turn to her children. The film adaptation, however, simplifies this scene to

\(^{82}\) DiQuinzio, *The Impossibility of Motherhood*, 10.
\(^{83}\) Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 80.
Dolly meeting Anna in a tearoom, where the stares and whispers of a judgmental public drive Anna to tears. A brief exchange of pleasantries occurs between the two women, before Anna asks:

ANNA: Don’t you disapprove of me for what I’ve done?

DOLLY: No. I wish I’d done the same. But no one asked me. Well, I wouldn’t have been brave enough. Stiva, you know, he doesn’t change. Like all men, I suppose.

This scene arguably works to foreclose the radical opportunities for care and relationality possible within the novel by offhandedly assuming that men cannot, or will not, change. There is both a longing and a kind of resignation implicit within this dialogue; Dolly states she is “not brave enough” to implement any changes within her own life, but wishes that she could assume the unencumbered life that Anna has. In keeping with the logic of postmaternalism, Dolly flippantly notes that the only thing keeping her from the postfeminist fantasy is the fact that no one has yet asked her to leave her life. Significantly, even in this dialogue, the care her children require, and the obvious part they would play in any decision for Dolly to leave Stiva, are disavowed in favour of the more familiar individualising rhetoric that weaves through and connects neoliberal rhetoric, postmaternal thinking, and the postfeminist fantasy.

Within the novel, however, Dolly is able to consider the realities of caring for her children; she worries for their futures, their educations, and their collective health:

At first she thought of the children, about whom, though the Princess and especially Kitty . . . had promised to look after them, she still felt anxious. . . . Then came problems of a more remote future: how she should start her children in the world . . . I can’t even give the children a start myself unless it’s with other people’s help and with humiliation. Well, supposing the best: that none of the other children die, and that I somehow succeed in bringing them up; at the very best they will only escape being ne’er-do-wells. That’s all I can hope for.”\(^{84}\)

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\(^{84}\) Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 714-716.
Given these worries and stresses, it is perhaps unsurprising that within the novel Dolly begins to feel envious of Anna, for her decision to take off and do what she wants. Dolly ponders,

[i]n what is she to blame? She wishes to live. God has implanted that need in our souls. It is quite possible I might have done the same. . . . I ought then to have left my husband and begun life anew. . . . I at any rate shall not reproach her at all. She is happy, she is making another happy and is not dragged down as I am, but she is in no doubt as fresh, clever, and frank as ever.\textsuperscript{85}

This musing would have arguably made a very compelling scene, as it provides the space to engage with the material realities of providing care to dependents. Significantly, Dolly identifies the likelihood that she will require various forms of assistance from her relatives in order to establish her children’s livelihoods. The necessity for relationality is thus arguably inscribed within this source text; such a scene could perhaps intervene in postmaternal figurations of motherhood as a private and individualised experience, by suggesting that the raising of children – including their capacity to act autonomously – is “nurtured through the care of others.”\textsuperscript{86} With only limited cultural scripts for meaningfully interrogating the realities of care and dependence, however, such a scene would chafe uncomfortably against the film’s broader postmaternal, and thus postfeminist, concerns. Within a film so strongly informed by narratives of individualism and autonomy, examinations of care are circumscribed by broader postfeminist concerns, and rely on postfeminist approaches in order to make meaning.

Kitty

In contrast to Anna and Dolly, whose framing within a broader narrative of individualised autonomy is prioritised over their embeddedness within a network of care, the depiction of Dolly’s sister Kitty within the film reflects an idealised “retreatist” form of postfeminist mothering and caring. Retreatism, as explained by Diane Negra, is the “pull[ing] back [from paid work] by affluent women to a perfected

\textsuperscript{85} Tolstoy, \textit{Anna Karenina}, 717-718.  
\textsuperscript{86} Clement, \textit{Care, Autonomy, and Justice}, 24.
domesticity.” Relying on romanticised representations of “home,” “retreatist” narratives have significant ramifications for conceptions of care and selfhood within the postfeminist milieu; indeed, this return to the home works to support neoliberal exhortations that care is a particularly feminine venture that is to be undertaken within the private sphere. Retreatist narratives thus work to foreclose the tensions between individualistic autonomy and caring that shape films like *Bride of the Wind* and *Anna Karenina*. Indeed, the postmaternal subject who returns home is no longer required to disavow the care she engages in; rather, it is expected that she has returned home explicitly to provide care for her family.

While the concept of retreatism is deployed most often in terms of successful professional businesswomen, its sentiments are arguably reflected within Kitty’s narrative. At the beginning of the film (and indeed, the novel), Kitty is being courted by the debonair and worldly Vronsky. Expecting a proposal from him, she refuses the proposal of Constantine Levin, a man who deplores city living, and much prefers to work the land on his rural estate. When humiliated by Vronsky’s preference for Anna, Kitty becomes disillusioned with society, and ultimately yearns for the simpler love and life offered by Levin. Her ecstatic move to the country with her new husband evokes the logic of retreatist narratives, wherein the subject is refreshed by a return to the home, and by leaving behind a public sphere coded as “a realm of competition, uncertainty, fear, and corruption.” While this narrative occurs within the novel as well as the adaptation, it is the film’s hyper-idealisation of Kitty, particularly her provision of care, once she “returns home” that is of interest here.

Unlike Dolly and Anna, Kitty does not have children for the majority of the film, and only gives birth towards the film’s end. Her initial childlessness is key to her idealised characterisation, for her childlessness frees her caring behaviours to be recast under the rhetoric of choice, instead of the rhetoric of burden or obligation that shadows Dolly and Anna’s search for autonomy. Simultaneously however, Kitty’s

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idealisation throughout the film means that there is a conservative element to her performance of care, where she cares because that is what women are broadly expected to do. Given that Anna and Dolly are both in dysfunctional relationships, they are arguably excluded from this essentialist idealisation of care; their priorities for themselves are the “wrong” kind, and so they can never be the kind of woman that Kitty is. Indeed, there is never any indication that Kitty is being encouraged to care; she cares for Levin’s brother Nikolai when Levin assumes, and even desires, that she should not. Given that her caring is a choice, she arguably not only escapes the censure faced by Anna and Dolly throughout the film – who, as mothers, are always at risk of failing their caring responsibilities – but her care also becomes indicative of her personal remarkableness. The ideal form of care, as posited by this film, is thus arguably performed as a result of free choice, and a personality predisposed to help.91 The particularly gendered nature of such assumptions is subsumed under the rhetoric of choice and the narrative of retreatism, and the possibilities of caring, while having responsibilities within the public sphere, are once again obscured.

One example of Kitty’s intense idealisation within this adaptation is in a scene where Kitty, while caring for Levin’s dying brother, Nikolai, washes Nikolai’s legs and feet, an action that is not evident within the source text. This scene arguably evokes the religious iconography of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet before The Last Supper, wherein Jesus’ humility is demonstrated through the way he serves, and thus cares for, his disciples.92 Another reading of this scene is that it indicates Kitty’s purity and chastity, as while she is washing Nikolai’s feet and legs, his partner, Masha, is bathing his chest, a far more sexually intimate action. By staying near Nikolai’s lower body, she remains detached from the sexuality and intimacy of Nikolai and Masha. This depiction of Kitty in hyper-ideal terms not proffered within the novel thus indicates the film’s adherence to postfeminist conventions; as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra have argued,

many postfeminist texts combine a deep uncertainty about existing options for women with an idealised, essentialised femininity that

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91 See Clement, who has argued that care is often understood “as an expression of one’s identity,” rather than a form of work, which is “a mere transaction of goods and services.” Clement, Care, Autonomy, and Justice, 53.

92 See, for example: Kay de Vries, “Humility and Its Practice in Nursing,” Nursing Ethics 11, no. 6 (2004): 578-579.
symbolically evades or transcends institutional and social problem spots.\(^{93}\)

In this way, the film depicts Kitty as performing an “essentialised femininity”\(^{94}\) that arguably obscures the ways that the options for women’s lives in both Tolstoy’s patriarchal Russian society, and by extension contemporary Western society, are often circumscribed by continuing gendered expectations and inequalities, as evidenced by the experiences of Anna, Dolly and Nicolai’s prostitute girlfriend, Masha. However, while Kitty’s performance of care is depicted in a way unavailable to either Anna or Dolly, the fact that Nicolai is an adult should not be underestimated. While he is indeed dying, and does die, Kitty’s enactment of care once again positions it as a behaviour that occurs between consenting adults.

Kitty’s idealisation within the film is also enhanced through the filmmakers’ decision not to depict the initial struggles the newlywed Levins’ experience. Indeed, within the novel, as Olga Karpushina argues, “we are shown more scenes where [Kitty and Levin] argue or are jealous of each other than those when they are truly happy.”\(^{95}\) According to Tolstoy’s novel, Levin and Kitty struggle often in the first few months of their marriage, as they both learn to live together, and what marriage means. Told from Levin’s perspective, the novel explains that

\begin{quote}
Levin had never thought it possible that between him and his wife there could be any but tender, respectful, and loving relations; and yet from the very beginning they had quarrelled: she had said he did not love her, but only loved himself, and began to cry and wave her arms.\(^{96}\)
\end{quote}

In contrast, the film depicts Kitty as already the ideal wife, often bathed in a soft light to indicate such a characterisation. Furthermore, Wright’s Kitty, once she has recovered from the humiliation at her debut ball, is calm: there are no tears, there is no arm-waving. In this way, Kitty reflects Negra’s assertion that the “hallmark of

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\(^{94}\) Tasker and Negra, “Introduction,” 10.


\(^{96}\) Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 567.
postfeminism is composure”97; Kitty is thus reworked within this film to reflect a melding of ‘natural’ caring and postfeminism. As a result of such a reworking, Kitty’s moving to the country upon her marriage to Levin can be understood as indicating that the ideal form of care is a privatised venture, one that is carried out by women in the private sphere.

By evoking a retreatist narrative, Kitty reaffirms traditionally gendered expectations that “caring for the physical and emotional welfare of others has been basic to the feminine experience,”98 as well as a postfeminist emphasis on individual autonomy, since her caring is depicted as a freely made choice. Kitty thus acts as a counterpoint to both Anna and Dolly; where Dolly and Anna both struggle to juggle the neoliberal imperative to achieve individualism and autonomy while being necessarily relationally bound to their children, Kitty reveals that care and individualistic autonomy are compatible in a postfeminist context only if the following criteria are met: caring performed outside the home is to be between autonomous adults; the postmaternal subject should retreat to the home prior to having children; caring responsibilities are, and should remain, particularly gendered; and, perhaps most importantly, caring is simultaneously both a personality trait and a set of behaviours that are freely chosen.

**Conclusion**

It can therefore be seen that care holds an ambivalent position within the postfeminist historical women’s film. While it is positive that the possibilities for a relational subjectivity are touched upon within such films, their depictions of care ultimately adhere to postfeminist and neoliberal conceptions of unencumbered individualism, figuring relationality as an adult concern in which, as Tronto and Fisher have argued, two autonomous adults “come together as equals and stay together as long as this serves their mutual advantage.”99 This focus on the reciprocation within adult relationships sidesteps questions of dependence, and reaffirms the desirability of an independent subjectivity in both female-friendship films and adulterous mother films.

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Of the two types of films explored in this chapter, it is thus perhaps the female-friendship film that offers the more radical account of relationality and care, as it can offer a relatively positive account of how women are able to care for each other through friendship. Depicting both the benefits and conflicts inherent in any form of friendship, historical female-friendship films arguably work to emphasise women’s historical exercise of relationality, suggesting that women’s friendships can undermine patriarchal gender norms, and provide alternative avenues of support and empowerment to women who refuse expectations of heteronormativity. These films’ depictions of relationality as a transaction between adults, however, contribute to broader societal disavowals of the centrality of dependence to many caring relationships. Furthermore, by mimicking market values, friendships arguably, at least to a certain extent, work to depoliticise the radical possibilities of care and relationality.

While female-friendship films canvas the possibilities of a relational subjectivity, adulterous mother films often attempt to quash the possibilities of relationality in favour of narratives of personal autonomy. Given that the protagonists of these films are mothers, however, the realities of their relationships with their child/ren periodically colour this search for autonomy, in ways that illustrate the incompatibilities between relationality or care and postfeminist individualism. Ideally, the adulterous mother’s embodiment of these tensions between the often diametrically opposed notions of care and autonomy, or motherhood and unencumberedness, could offer a unique opportunity through which to examine competing ideological strands and rhetorical practices. However, given current neoliberal concerns, and the particular manifestations of postfeminist and postmaternal logics, the potentially radical possibilities presented by this figure have, at least within *Bride of the Wind* and *Anna Karenina*, arguably been foreclosed. While the needs of the child may, at times, intervene in the protagonists’ search for autonomy, the films are broadly characterised by a postfeminist valorisation of the individual (and its concomitant disavowal of care), a prioritisation which significantly narrows the ideological space within which to consider the women as relational or caring subjects.

This focus on the protagonists as individuals, however, simultaneously allows the films to subtly critique the postfeminist fantasy of unencumbered individuality; while Anna and Alma may seek to live the life of the unencumbered individual, they are always haunted by the spectre of a relational subjectivity that is embodied by their children. Despite the fact that the children are often “accounted for” by the outsourcing of their care to household staff, they remain disruptive figures whose very presence interrupts the protagonists’ search for autonomy. By reading the films in terms of the absence of the protagonists’ children, both Bride of the Wind and Anna Karenina arguably indicate how the relational demands of mothering collide with both postfeminist and postmaternal exhortations to deny care relationships and care responsibilities in favour of the illusion of unencumbered individualism. This collision thus leaves the adulterous mother in a position that is neither completely unencumbered by, nor completely engaged in, motherhood.
Conclusion

Postfeminist Historical Women’s Films

As I have shown throughout this thesis, feminist thought is one of the dominant discursive practices through which meaning is made in postfeminist historical women’s films. Drawing on various strands of feminist thought, such films respond to gendered issues that are central to the feminist movement, such as women’s entry into and success in the public sphere, women’s equality through legislation, and women’s social position. Indeed, the films are broadly marked as feminist through the ways that they collectively draw attention to the ways in which social, institutional and political structures intersect to oppress women. Even if the protagonists do not actively seek to challenge these structures, it is this acknowledgement of broader societal constraints on women’s lives which expresses the feminist sensibility of postfeminist historical women’s films.

Nevertheless, the deployment of feminist thought as a discursive framework within these films lacks uniformity across the subgenre, and the organisation of this thesis attests to the ways in which individual postfeminist historical women’s films tend to cluster around specific strands of feminist thought. Starting with depictions of a feminism that is broadly in tune with postfeminist and neoliberal priorities, and ending with a feminism markedly incompatible with such concerns, I have traced how feminism manifests within postfeminist historical women’s films, and how it can be affirmed, challenged, or complicated. Chapter One, for example, considered the privileging of a liberal feminist sensibility in Penny Marshall’s A League of Their Own, Mira Nair’s Amelia and Phyllida Lloyd’s The Iron Lady. Given that liberal feminism is, in some ways, the precursor to postfeminism¹ and neoliberal forms of feminism,² it is perhaps unsurprising that such films broadly indicate the ideological alignment between these discourses, particularly through the way notions of personal independence and individualism are mobilised as evidence of the protagonists’ social

equality. The analysis in Chapter Two then explored how films that prioritise a feminist politics of speech and silence as a key discursive practice, specifically Joe Wright’s Pride & Prejudice and Cary Fukunaga’s Jane Eyre, offer a similar alignment between feminist, postfeminist and neoliberal priorities. This is evidenced through the films’ prioritisation of personal independence as expressed through speech, although the anxiety that manifests in both films indicates a growing tension between neoliberal and postfeminist priorities. This tension between neoliberalism and postfeminism becomes more pronounced within postfeminist historical women’s films that prioritise a socialist feminist sensibility, as explained in Chapter Three. Indeed, the chronology of Steven Soderbergh’s Erin Brockovich, Niki Caro’s North Country and Nigel Cole’s Made in Dagenham – moving from individualised action against a corporation in Erin Brockovich to a collective form of action that pressures the government in Made in Dagenham – suggests both an increased interest in collective responses to institutional problems, as well as a broader scepticism about the idealised individualism required of the neoliberal worker.

While the first three chapters of this thesis considered how feminist politics or ideals are deployed in relation to postfeminist priorities, whether these ideals are broadly synchronised with postfeminist rhetoric or increasingly undermining it, the fourth chapter investigated the extent to which postfeminist rhetoric is in turn shaped by the complexities of feminist thinking, particularly in terms of representations of the female body. Indeed, the analysis of the films of Chapter Four – Saul Dibb’s The Duchess and Rodrigo Garcia’s Albert Nobbs – elucidated how postfeminist depictions of the historical body are informed by an inconclusiveness within feminist thought about the female body, and this inconclusiveness produces representations of the female body that are characterised by ideological ambivalence.

In contrast to the varying levels of compatibility between postfeminism and feminism explored in Chapters One to Four, Chapter Five explored how certain strands of feminism have so far proved incompatible with postfeminist priorities. To illuminate this discordance, I focused in particular on the marginalisation of care feminism within Bruce Beresford’s Bride of the Wind and Joe Wright’s Anna Karenina. It is notable that the deradicalised care depicted in these films aligns with the narratives of independence and individualism that structured the films explored in the first chapter; in this way, it can be seen that depictions of feminism in postfeminist historical
women’s films are often mediated through postfeminist priorities that privilege both a sense of personal empowerment as well as a subjectivity characterised by separation from others.³

Notably, the films’ feminist sensibilities can be circumscribed not only by their postfeminist priorities, but also by their historical settings. Indeed, when feminist protagonists are always located in the past, their alleged irrelevance for the present becomes normalised.⁴ Given that postfeminist rhetoric assumes that equality is always already achieved within contemporary society,⁵ an emphasis on the temporal distinction between “then” and “now” within such films facilitates a celebration of feminist history, and works to reaffirm feminism as a historical phenomenon. Furthermore, the temporal distinction between “then” and “now” – a separation particularly pronounced in films set prior to the twentieth century, and exaggerated through the use of epilogues that clarify the “resolution” of films about events of the twentieth century – functions as a justification for behaviours that may seem out of step with contemporary postfeminist concerns, such as silence or collective action.


Despite this notion that the historical settings of the films may work to “divest the protagonists of their radical potential,” however, postfeminist historical women’s films can also contribute to a popular version of feminist history – sometimes radical – that is not only broadly accessible, but also palatable to a contemporary audience. Indeed, the films collectively provide a potted history of feminism that is made available through both biopics of real women and the adaptation of characters and narratives that hold a privileged position in feminist histories. In some ways then, these films can be seen to be intervening in patriarchal histories that would marginalise the contributions of women to political, social and cultural institutions.

Films discussed in this thesis such as North Country, Erin Brockovich, Made in Dagenham, Sarah Gavron’s Suffragette and Timothy Hines’ forthcoming 10 Days in a Madhouse (a depiction of journalist Nelly Bly’s undercover exposé on the treatment of women in Blackwell Island’s Woman’s Insane Asylum) illustrate how women, even before they were granted the vote (as evidenced in the last two films listed) could have a remarkable influence on public life. Furthermore, the vast breadth of historical temporalities depicted in the subgenre – from eighteenth-century England (The Duchess) and nineteenth century Russia (Anna Karenina) to 1990s United States (Erin Brockovich) – also contributes to a continuity of feminist history, a linking of periods that initially appear separate. This notion of feminist history as continuous, rather than changing, has the potential to disrupt stagnant postfeminist notions of equality as achieved, as the link between “then” and “now” can never truly be severed. In this way, it can be seen that just as feminism is not always depicted as radical within postfeminist popular culture, neither can postfeminism always contain feminism’s radical potential.

This continuity between the past and present is particularly evident in the advertising materials for Sarah Gavron’s 2015 film Suffragette. Using the phrase “The Time Is Now,” the film’s advertising reads as a call to arms, an unapologetic invocation of a history of feminist social action that is rooted in the desire for change. Importantly, the use of the word “now” in this phrase signifies a strategic slippage in

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temporality that functions to emphasise the continuity rather than the conflict between the “then” depicted in the film’s narrative, and the “now” of the contemporary audience. “Now” simultaneously indicates both the historical period of the film (when read as the motivation of the characters on whom this phrase is emblazoned) as well as the contemporary period in which the “now” is being read. When paired with the tagline at the end of the film’s trailers – “Recruiting: 2015” – the rhetoric of feminist action and activism becomes even more explicit and, perhaps more importantly, coded as an active and contemporaneous process.

Taken together, the films explored within this thesis thus function to both shore up postfeminist priorities of individualism and personal empowerment, while also intervening in such narratives. My reading suggests that postfeminist historical women’s films have the potential to make feminist history accessible and palatable to a contemporary audience, and thus to facilitate readings of feminist thought as continuous, rather than changing and separate. By filling in the gaps of patriarchal histories with women’s stories, these films make visible the ways that women are able to influence patriarchal structures, and ultimately effect social change.

Postfeminism and Race

While the films explored in this thesis have been analysed in terms of the relationships depicted between feminism, postfeminism and neoliberalism, a limitation of this research is a lack of critical investigation into how racially diverse protagonists and characters might further complicate this subgenre. This lack of investigation is, in some ways, a reflection of the marginalisation of protagonists of colour not only in postfeminist historical women’s films, but across postfeminist popular culture more broadly. Perhaps a result of the inherent conservatism of mainstream popular film industries, race is repeatedly glossed over, and written out of many popular cultural texts. This marginalisation is often due to the way that, as Kellie Carter Jackson has compellingly argued,

[w]hite men are programmed to take their own centrality for granted and thus, when put in decision-making positions in the entertainment industry, are prone to erase any threat to that centrality.\footnote{8}{Kellie Carter Jackson, “‘Is Viola Davis In It?’: Black Women Actors and the ‘Single Stories’ of Historical Film,” \textit{Transition} 114 (2014): 174.}

A key way that the centrality of white men in popular culture is maintained, particularly within postfeminist historical women’s films, is through the elevation of narratives of white women, as white men often retain roles of significance within women’s films. Examples from this thesis include, but are not limited to: Jimmy Dugan in \textit{A League of Their Own}; George Putnam in \textit{Amelia}; Mr Darcy in \textit{Pride & Prejudice}; and Count Vronsky in \textit{Anna Karenina}. Each of these characters, while not the films’ protagonists, are key to driving the narrative forward; for example, George Putnam for his facilitation of Amelia’s flying feats, or Jimmy Dugan for providing an internal obstacle for the women to triumph over. The significance of white men in women’s films is also reaffirmed when the character in question is an antagonist, or antagonist-like, such as Karenin in \textit{Anna Karenina} or The Duke in \textit{The Duchess}. Through thwarting, or attempting to thwart, the plans or agency of the protagonist, he reinscribes the social and institutional power of white men. Furthermore, the success of films featuring white protagonists not only ensures their consistent production, but also obscures the possibilities for representing non-white protagonists. In other words, the logic of entertainment industries dictates that investing in films featuring white women as protagonists – films that have a proven market – is less of a financial risk than investing in or producing films featuring non-white protagonists.

This lack of racial diversity is reflected not only in postfeminist popular cultural texts, but also in conceptualisations of postfeminism as an analytical or scholarly framework. Kimberly Springer, for example, has argued that “[t]o date, studies of postfeminism have studiously noted that many of its icons are white and cited the absence of women of color, but the analysis seems to stop there,”\footnote{9}{Springer, “Divas, Evil Black Bitches and Bitter Black Women,” 249.} while Jess Butler has argued that the assumption of the default whiteness and middle-classness of postfeminism\footnote{10}{See: Tasker and Negra, “Introduction,” 8.} “obscures the ways in which this discursive formation includes (albeit in specific and limited ways) non-white and nonheterosexual subjects.”\footnote{11}{Butler, “For White Girls Only?,” 49 (italics in original).}

postfeminist popular culture includes many women of colour, such as actresses Kerry Washington, Chandra Wilson, Viola Davis (the first black actress to win an Emmy Award), Octavia Spencer and Gabourey Sidibe; from singers such as Beyoncé Knowles, Jennifer Hudson and Jennifer Lopez, to rappers Nicki Minaj and Lil’ Kim. The queen of television, Oprah Winfrey, and television writer and producer of the phenomenally successful television series Grey’s Anatomy, Private Practice, Scandal and How To Get Away With Murder, Shonda Rhimes, are both black women. In Australia, Aboriginal actresses such as Deborah Mailman, Miranda Tapsell, Shari Sebbens, and singer Jessica Mauboy are very visible, and very popular. As Butler has argued, to say that “postfeminism excludes women of colour – or worse, that women of colour do not appear in postfeminist popular culture – seems both overly simplistic and empirically unfounded.”13 And yet postfeminist scholarship – this thesis included – continues to prioritise the alleged whiteness of postfeminism. Theories of postfeminism thus need to be pushed further and more consistently, stretched out to interrogate how racialized narratives and non-white characters are strategically deployed, as are feminist narratives, to shore up the narratives of allegedly-achieved equality that circulate in popular culture.

While both Springer and Butler have provided important articulations of how postfeminist popular culture does engage with women of colour, both pieces of scholarship investigate depictions of contemporary women, rather than historical figures or characters. The addition of a historical setting, as explored throughout this thesis, has important ramifications for the framing of particular issues and character traits, often assisting in the justification of feminist behaviours that may seem inappropriate, undesirable or anachronistic if located in a contemporary setting. A historical setting might thus be expected to complicate postfeminist depictions of female protagonists of colour. Could, for example, the positive depiction of feminist anger explored in chapter three be replicable in historical films featuring black female protagonists, given that, as Springer has compellingly argued, “post-feminism situates black women as always already angry, carrying a chip on their collective shoulders and ready to go off at the least personal slight”?14 Or might the positive depiction of angry,

12 For an excellent discussion of how Nicki Minaj intervenes in the whiteness of narratives of postfeminism, see: Butler, “For White Girls Only?,” 51-54.
13 Butler, “For White Girls Only?,” 49.
black historical women be justifiable, with the reliance on the temporal separation between “then” and “now” that is key to historical films functioning to affirm equality as achieved in postfeminist western society?

Such a question is difficult to answer at this stage, especially given that the majority of postfeminist historical women’s films feature white protagonists and, often, do not feature any women of colour in their named cast. Indeed, of the films considered within this thesis, only one film addresses racial discrimination, and only very briefly: Marshall’s A League of Their Own. The acknowledgement of racial discrimination occurs during one of the film’s several montage scenes when the League is gaining popularity. Sandwiched between footage of Doris (Rosie O’Donnell) being offered flowers by two young boys in the crowd, and Marla Hooch’s (Megan Cavanagh) announcement of marriage, is a scene featuring Dottie (Geena Davis) and an unnamed black woman. While Ellen-Sue (Freddie Simpson) and Dottie are warming up, Ellen-Sue accidentally over-pitches. The ball lands near a black woman who, rather than throwing the ball to Dottie, throws it far over her head, thus proving her skill and strength. The two women make eye contact, and Dottie nods, silently acknowledging that it is racial discrimination that denies this talented woman the opportunities available to the women in the League. Other than this brief moment in this one film, however, the subgenre is markedly focused on white protagonists.

Thus while the absence of protagonists of colour within the films of this thesis is partly a result of the selection of texts, it is also a reflection of the dearth of postfeminist historical women’s films more generally that address questions of race and racial discrimination. Indeed, as Carter Jackson has notes, “[w]e continue to only ‘see’ black women in film when their images are peripheral – which is another way of saying that black women are barely seen in historical films.”\textsuperscript{15} Even when black women or women of colour are central to historical films, it is important to take into account the roles that they are playing; as Carter Jackson has further noted, black women are often cast “as women who occupy subordinate roles (such as maids).”\textsuperscript{16} This prioritisation of narratives of black women or women of colour as subordinated works to reaffirm the marginalisation of black women in white patriarchal society more

\textsuperscript{15} Carter Jackson, “Is Viola Davis In It?,” 173.
\textsuperscript{16} Carter Jackson, “Is Viola Davis In It?,” 173.
broadly, as even when they are “seen” in historical films, it is only on the margins of society.

In the last three years, however, there have been two films released that intervene in this tendency to cast black women and women of colour in subordinate roles, and thus indicate a fruitful direction for future research in this area. Wayne Blair’s 2012 Australian film *The Sapphires*, and Amma Asante’s 2013 British film *Belle*, both released after the conceptualisation of this thesis, feature protagonists of colour who are not in a traditionally subordinated position. *The Sapphires*, for example, follows The Sapphires, a singing group comprising of four Australian Aboriginal women, as they are sent to Vietnam to perform for the troops in 1968. The film is loosely based on a true story, and canvases how racism impacts on the women’s lives, particularly through the character of Kay (Shari Sebbens), who was removed from her family, and was thus a part of the Stolen Generation. Importantly, the film also emphasises the agency that the women were able to exercise within their lives. *Belle*, set in the eighteenth-century, is inspired by the life of Dido Elizabeth Belle, the mixed-race illegitimate daughter of Captain Sir John Lindsay, who was raised as a free gentlewoman by her father’s uncle. *Belle* draws attention to how her racial identity impacted Belle’s life, and how her position as a free gentlewoman existed in tension with the subordination and slavery of black women and men at the time.

Given that *The Sapphires* and *Belle* are not produced within the US, they provide a useful point of comparison to US-based postfeminist historical women’s films, such as Bill Condon’s 2006 *Dreamgirls* and Tate Taylor’s 2011 *The Help*. Indeed, a comparison between *Dreamgirls* and *The Sapphires* is almost intuitive, given that both are set in the same period, and depict black and Aboriginal women as performers, rather than subordinates. A comparison of the four films together may intervene in the broad narratives of postfeminist popular culture as particularly white, and might further facilitate an exploration of how racism manifests differently according to both temporal and geographical location. By investigating the similarities and differences between the forms of racism depicted in both recent-historical and older-historical films, and in different geographical locations, a more complex and nuanced view of racism within postfeminism could be elucidated.
“The Time Is Now”: Racism and Postfeminist/Feminist History in *Suffragette*

While the lack of racial diversity in popular cultural texts has been critiqued by feminists of colour since the 1980s, recent frustrations around the whitewashing of feminist histories and theories have crystallised into pointed critiques of Gavron’s *Suffragette*. Responses to this film have been a mixture of critical acclaim over the film’s depiction of working-class protagonists and dissatisfaction at the film’s lack of racial diversity, and the polarity between these two perspectives makes clear that, while an increasingly socialist version of feminist rhetoric is perhaps gaining currency in popular culture, it is a rhetoric that continues to fail women of colour.\(^\text{17}\)

Set in London 1912-1913, *Suffragette* depicts the story of fictional character Maud Watts (Carey Mulligan), a young working-class mother who becomes a suffragette, a foot soldier of the Women’s Social and Political Union’s fight for women’s suffrage. Initially wary of the militancy of the suffragettes, Maud’s introduction to the movement originates through her friendship with fellow laundry-worker Violet Miller (Anne-Marie Duff). While reluctant to be counted as a suffragette, Maud’s attendance at a protest, and subsequent arrest and incarceration, puts into motion a combination of escalating social censure, an increasingly precarious family life, and an intensification of surveillance by the police. Soon stripped of the life she knew before, Maud embraces the politics, methods and support offered by the suffragettes, and devotes herself to the cause. Depicting historical figures such as Emmeline Pankhurst (Meryl Streep) and Emily Wilding Davison (Natalie Press), and composite characters, such as Edith Ellyn (Helena Bonham Carter) who is inspired by suffragettes Barbara Gould and Edith Garrud,\(^\text{18}\) the film illustrates a heightening of


militancy action by suffragettes, from smashing store windows (an attack on property),
to blowing up post office boxes and cutting telegraph lines (an attack on communications),
and culminating in the bombing of Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George’s (Adrian Schiller) holiday home. The government reacts brutally to these acts, with arrests, physical assault, raids, a refusal to recognise the suffragettes as political prisoners, and force-feedings in response to incarcerated suffragettes’ hunger strikes.

*Suffragette* has been praised for the way it depicts the experiences of working-class suffragettes, women who are traditionally absent from histories of the suffragette movement. This prioritisation of the experiences of working class women has been noted by several reviewers, and director Sarah Gavron explains that class consciousness is at the heart of the film:

> [w]e wanted to explore what pushed these working class women, who had no entitlement and no platform and are so rarely featured, to join the movement: to endure police brutality, commit arson, go to prison, hunger strike and be force-fed at such personal cost, often losing their jobs, homes, and families.

This focus on working-class women is also strategic, as by focusing on one of the most vulnerable classes of women at this time, the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression becomes particularly marked. As Richard Brody has articulated,

> [t]heir lack of voting rights is matched by their lack of civil rights overall—including the right to dispose of their property as they see fit, and even the right, as a mother, to exercise authority in relation to children. What’s more, women’s domestic subjugation to husbands is matched in public life by the menace of sexual abuse at

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work, inflicted with impunity by male supervisors . . . [it is a] horrific circle—a legal system that refuses to grant women basic rights and allows them no power to change that system, keeping them in a double state of subjugation, to the public and domestic authority of men.21

Importantly, the depth of this interconnection of women’s oppression is only revealed as the narrative progresses. By starting the film with Maud relatively content, the ways that women are oppressed are rendered somewhat invisible. While Maud is not paid as much as her husband Sonny (Ben Whishaw), despite the fact that her work at the laundry is more dangerous than his, she nevertheless has a certain level of agency within her life. Once Maud begins to question the constraints around her life, however, the relationship between women’s lack of suffrage and their lack of civil rights begins to materialise, as she is punished increasingly severely for her transgressions, and the precariousness of her social position is emphasised.

A particularly striking example of this precariousness is when, after having been incarcerated for the first time, Maud lies to her husband about working overtime, and instead attends a speech given by the elusive fugitive Emmeline Pankhurst. When the police arrive to break up the crowd, and arrest Emmeline, Maud is also arrested. Rather than detaining them, however, Inspector Arthur Steed (Brendan Gleeson) orders that all the women arrested be “drop[ped] off at their front door [so that] their husbands can deal with them.” Instead of martyring the women for the suffragette cause, Steed hopes to activate the social censure that would come from having the women delivered to their homes by police vans, thus shaming both the women and their husbands in front of their neighbours. More disturbingly, Steed’s plan also seems to rely on the fact that his order will provoke the husbands of the women into domestic violence, which was of course at the time legal. Taken home under these orders Maud, having been instructed by her husband to end her involvement with the suffragettes after her first incarceration, is unceremoniously barred by him from entering their home, and is then housed by the WSPU. The severity of Sonny’s reaction to Maud’s behaviour is, in some ways, the beginning of the end of her life as she

previously knew it, and begins to make clear how women’s lack of suffrage is just one of a multitude of laws that enforced women’s vulnerability, and thus dependency on the good will of the men in their lives. By framing the narrative through the working-class Maud’s growing involvement with the movement, the vast and uncompromising power men have over women’s lives, both institutionally and personally, is uncovered, and the increasing militancy of the suffragettes is both justified and justifiable.

Importantly, while the working-class narratives produced by *Suffragette* are a much-needed intervention into suffragette histories that generally prioritise the actions of middle-class women, the “working-classness” of this film simultaneously operates as a factor through which militant social activism is rendered palatable for a middle-class audience. In this way, the film is not unlike *Made in Dagenham*, as explored in Chapter Three. Both films are able to justify the social action of their protagonists through an emphasis on both the material conditions of the working classes, as well as the way that certain aspects of the protagonists’ suffering can be tied to the historical context the film is depicting. In this way, the film is able to emphasise, and indeed romanticise, the differences between the protagonist and the audience, both in terms of temporality and the (assumed) financial stability of the postfeminist middle-class audience.22

The material conditions of the working-class Maud are repeatedly emphasised within *Suffragette*. Not only does she work in a dangerous and physically-demanding laundry job for less pay than her husband, but they live in a small apartment where privacy is maintained by the use of curtains, rather than doors. Maud is subjected to sexual harassment from her boss, and is expected to deliver packages on his behalf on her way home from work. When she is banished from her home by her husband, she sleeps in the grounds of an abandoned church, as she has nowhere else to go. Much of this suffering, however, is tied specifically to a historical period in which women had no rights. Indeed, at this time, women had no right to vote, no right to own property, no rights over their children, no right to equal pay. The sacrifices that Maud makes, and indeed the losses that she suffers, are thus almost unimaginable to a middle-class postfeminist audience, for whom these rights have been enshrined in law. Maud’s (historical) militancy thus becomes justified and condoned by the audience, as the film

22 Tasker and Negra, “Introduction,” 2.
makes very clear that she has no other options within this society. In this way, her actions become romanticised, as they can be read as a refusal to give in to the patriarchal institutions that have denied her civil rights, and an appropriate response to the intensity of her suffering.

As in the films discussed in Chapter Three, this focus on a historical working-class protagonist also works to construct the vulnerabilities of the working-classes as a historical phenomenon, while simultaneously placing the burden for class equality on the working class. By emphasising how Maud’s suffering and lack of civil rights is a product of this period, the film also arguably includes her status as a working-class woman as part of her historical oppression. As canvassed in Chapter Three, the consistent pairing of women’s historical oppression with being working-class thus contributes to the notion that working-classness, like the other forms of oppression that are “resolved” by the end of the film, is a historical relic. In this way, Suffragette arguably contributes to the postfeminist notion that class equality has been achieved in contemporary society. It is this assumption that the inequalities faced by the working-classes are confined to the annals of history, and that their civil disobedience is likewise a historical relic, that makes the militancy of the suffragettes palatable to a contemporary audience.

Suffragette is also noteworthy for the way it has inspired feminist protest; the film’s premiere at the London Film Festival was disrupted by protesters from the feminist direct-action collective, Sisters Uncut. Using, as protester Sarah Kwei later explained, “the publicity of the night to remind the world that the fight [for women’s equality] is far from over,” the protesters staged a “die-in” to protest the UK government’s austerity measures and resulting cuts to social welfare, particularly the cuts to domestic violence resources and support services. The protest was well-received by the film’s actresses; Helena Bonham-Carter, for example, “said the protest

was the perfect response to the film,” while Romola Garai said “to be honest it makes me happy to see feminism alive and well and making an impact.” In addition, screenwriter Abi Morgan, who has stated her intention “to work only on projects that focus on women for the foreseeable future,” declared the protest to be “in the spirit of the Suffragettes . . . I think she would have approved, Emmeline Pankhurst, actually.”

Importantly, this strategy of protesting in front of the media guaranteed to be present at a film’s premiere is not unlike Emily Wilding Davison’s fatal protest at the Epsom Derby, a link noted by the protesters. By deploying similar strategies to the suffragettes, at the premiere of *Suffragette*, the protesters sought to locate their action within a broader history of feminist action, while simultaneously challenging the notion that feminism is a historical relic. As activist Latifa has explained,

> [t]he struggle for women’s liberation isn’t over. At a time when two women a week are killed by violent men in the UK, we need to keep fighting because dead women can’t vote. . . . This film is talking about women’s liberation in a very celebratory sense and there’s this argument that we’re in a post-feminist era so that means that our messages more than ever need to [be] heard because there is this delusional element to it all.

This sense of celebration identified by Latifa often occurs within postfeminist historical women’s films, due to the way that the differences between the “past” and “present” depicted in this subgenre often hinge on the resolution of a particular film’s key issue. Indeed, within such films the “past” is characterised by the struggle with a particular

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27 Marks, “Why Did Sisters Uncut Protest at the Premiere of Suffragette?”


issue, while the “present” is characterised by the issue’s resolution. *Suffragette*, however, undermines this separation of past and present, instead emphasising the continuity of issues of women’s suffrage, and thus equality more broadly. This is achieved through the film’s strategy of including an honour/dishonour roll during the credits, which specifies the years in which particular countries have, or have not, extended their female citizens the vote. This is a particularly powerful strategy, as the roll finishes by stating that in 2015, the Saudi Arabian Government has pledged to extend the right to vote to women. This finale to the film makes clear that the fight for universal female suffrage is not over, and gives the tagline “the time is now” particular poignancy.

Significantly, the protesters were not only concerned to challenge notions of feminism as a thing of the past; they were also concerned about the film’s whiteness. As Latifa argued, *Suffragette* “ignores the fact that women of colour were completely involved in the suffragette struggle. This film isn’t representing them.”30 Thus while the film may present a unique version of suffragette history that is often unexplored in popular culture, the protest also drew attention to the lack of racial diversity that it depicts. As all of the actresses are white – Carey Mulligan, Helena Bonham Carter, Anne-Marie Duff, Natalie Press, Meryl Streep, Romola Garai – the critical acclaim praising the film for being by women and about women “only rings true,” as Halimah Manan has argued, “if you are a white woman.”31 This exclusion, while explained by the UK’s alleged lack of diversity at the time,32 does not account for the fact that, as Hannah Flint has argued, “East London during the early 20th century [the setting of the film] was a prime location for migrant and ethnic communities.”33

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30 Slawson, “Feminist Protesters Storm Red Carpet at London Premiere of Suffragette.”
Furthermore, one of the key arguments raised as part of this challenge to the film’s lack of diversity is based on the fact that while the film depicts historical events, such as the hunger striking and subsequent force-feeding of incarcerated suffragettes and Emily Wilding Davison’s death at the Epsom Derby, Maud is a composite character. While *Suffragette* may, as Sally Williams has explained, “bend history around central people and events,” the fictionalisation of the protagonist has led some reviewers to identify and lament the unexplored possibilities of a more racially diverse cast. Leah Pickett, for example, has argued that [w]ith so many fictional characters mixed in with historical ones like Pankhurst, the filmmakers could have equitably shown some cracks in the system, such as having one character discuss how black women are not welcome to join the fight, and having the fictional character of Maud, perhaps, confront that notion. Or they could have shown an actual black person; that would have been even better. But instead, the issue is tidily ignored.

Moreover, it is not only black women who have been ignored within the film. Other reviewers have queried why Indian women are not evident, especially given the existence of a famous photo depicting Indian suffragettes marching as part of the 1911 “Women’s Coronation Procession.” Britain’s long history of imperialism and colonisation makes this lack of diversity striking; as Manan has argued, Britain’s imperial mission was mostly utilised by the middle class and, since *Suffragette* is focused on the working class, none of that will appear particularly relevant. Until you remember that Britain was not an island cut off from the rest of the world, but wholly invested in

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and profiting from, countries they had colonised; while many British people went to live abroad, various people from the colonies came here. So, even without the fancy procession and its Empire Pageant, many people of colour would have featured in everyday life as servants, indentured workers and even visitors.\textsuperscript{37}

According to this perspective, the very history of Britain demands a more racially diverse cast than is offered in \textit{Suffragette}. Furthermore, Princess Sophia Duleep Singh, an Indian princess whose father had lost everything in the process of colonialism, “was part of Emmeline Pankhurst’s close coterie of friends – she was one of her ‘rock star’ suffragettes.”\textsuperscript{38} While Singh was an aristocrat, and thus beyond the purview of a film strategically focused on the experiences of a working-class protagonist, her welcome presence in the suffrage movement complicates the all-white history that Gavron and Morgan present.

\textit{Suffragette} also caused controversy prior to its release, when four of the film’s actresses – Carey Mulligan, Meryl Streep, Romola Garai and Anne-Marie Duff – were photographed as part of a publicity shoot in shirts emblazoned with the Emmeline Pankhurst quote: “I’d rather be a rebel than a slave.” Lambasted for its lack of sensitivity, the Time Out London photo shoot became a flashpoint around which frustrations about the white-washing of women’s history, and the broad inability to account for racial diversity in popular culture, coalesced. A useful description of the shoot’s tone-deafness is offered by blogger Yemisi Ilesanmi, who explores why this particular publicity shoot should be considered a failure:

\begin{quote}
Not everyone has the luxury of choosing between being a rebel or a slave; [i]t lacks intersectional feminism; [t]urning a blind eye to racism in the name of fighting sexism is never right; [i]t is much more than just an African American vs UK suffrage movement debate; [b]eing a rebel does not automatically exclude anyone from being a slave; [i]t blames and shames the victims of systemic oppression; [a]s
\end{quote}


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an Emmeline Pankhurst quote, it is still questionable in context, and on T-shirts; [w]hite women equating sexism to slavery is disgusting.39 These reasons epitomise the critiques of white feminism made by black feminists and feminists of colour in the 1980s. At its most basic, this publicity shoot indicates that there is a blindness to issues of race not only in mainstream feminism, but also in postfeminist culture more broadly. While intersectional theories are increasingly evident (although by no means ubiquitous) within academic feminism, incidents such as the Suffragette t-shirt scandal indicate that intersectional approaches are yet to gain significant traction within mainstream popular cultural texts.

The critical reception of Suffragette thus makes clear the ways that, as I have argued throughout this thesis, postfeminist historical women’s films intersect with, and perhaps illustrate, the concerns of the feminist movement more broadly. By positively depicting, and indeed justifying, the militancy of the suffragettes, Suffragette also indicates that perhaps the feminism depicted within postfeminist historical women’s films is becoming more overt, and possibly even more radical. As with each of the other films examined, however, Suffragette also has postfeminist limitations that undermine its radicality; in this case, the well-founded accusations of whitewashing. Notably, however, the feminism and postfeminism depicted in Suffragette converge in terms of their vulnerability to this critique. In some ways then, feminism’s chequered history of dealing with racism and racial exclusion is mirrored in postfeminist approaches to feminist history, not unlike the ways that feminist inconclusiveness about the female body informs postfeminist depictions of the historical body.

Yet, given the relatively recent releases of Belle and The Sapphires, and the public outcry surrounding Suffragette’s lack of racial diversity, it is perhaps not too

optimistic to hope that more films depicting protagonists of colour will be made in the future. And when these films are made, they will have the potential to enable, as do all postfeminist historical women’s films, useful entry points – be it an accessible language, or an analytical framework – through which viewers can interpret their own lives and experiences. In this way, postfeminist historical women’s films can provide a palatable, and even enjoyable, introduction to the ideas and concerns of the feminist movement. Indeed, by consistently restaging women’s history through feminist modes of thought, postfeminist historical women’s films can intervene in depoliticised postfeminist narratives, revisit approaches to women’s equality and, through looking at the past, make explicit feminist possibilities for the future.
Filmography


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