

**Women's Media Studies Network Symposium**

**'The terrible girls: feminism and popular culture'**

**MeCCSA 2009 Conference, Bradford University  
National Media Museum, 16 January 2009**

This panel had been convened on the occasion of the publication of Diane Negra's book *What a Girl Wants?: fantasizing the reclamation of the self in postfeminism* and as a continuation of the debates raised in the successful conference 'The Point of Feminism' which took place at Reading in September 2008. We were pleased that Professor Negra did agree to be one of our respondents.

Event introduced by Heather Nunn (WMSN Chair) and Anita Biressi (WMSN Communications)

**Speakers:**

Kaitlynn Mendes (University of Nottingham) , Helen Thornham (City University), Nancy Thumim (London School of Economics)<sup>1</sup>, Elke Weissmann (Edge Hill University)

**Respondents:**

Vicky Ball (University of Sunderland) and Diane Negra (University College, Dublin)

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Design of this booklet by Salvatore Scifo for the MeCCSA Women's Media Studies Network

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<sup>1</sup> \*Unfortunately Nancy was unwell and couldn't attend. But we are pleased to include her paper here.

**Kaitlynn Mendes**  
**University of Nottingham**

*'The lady is a closet feminist':*

*The shift towards post-feminism in British and American papers*

As I write this paper in the early months of 2009, few would disagree that we live in a postfeminist era. Academics have been publishing books and articles on this phenomenon for several years now (See the following for some recent examples. Arthurs 2003; Levy 2006; McRobbie 2004, 2009; Negra 2009; Tasker and Negra 2007; Whelehan 2005; Wolf 1991). Though academics rarely agree on *the* definition of postfeminism, one common description is that it attempts to convince society of feminism's redundancy (Gerhard 2005: 40). More recently, Diane Negra (2009: 2) defined postfeminism as something that "distorts and often willfully misunderstands the political and social goals of feminism, and trades on the notion of feminism as rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist." We have all heard stereotypes of feminists as hairy-legged, man-hating dungaree wearing lesbians. Such labels act as a powerful deterrent to women who challenge feminine norms (speak their minds too strongly, dress unconventionally, reject feminine routines such as shaving, waxing, etc), and help to keep them on the "correct" path of femininity. Such labels remind women that there are social consequences for challenging gender norms, and it often takes a strong person to identify themselves as a feminist up front.

While many scholars acknowledge the fact that we live in a postfeminist society today, it is less clear when this began.<sup>2</sup> At what point did we start to accept feminist goals, yet reject the label? These were some of the questions I asked when beginning my doctoral dissertation on how British and American newspapers reported the second-wave feminist movement between 1968 and 1982, a time when I argue the

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the first accounts of postfeminism, antifeminism and a feminist "backlash" can be found in the early nineties with Susan Faludi's (1991) book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* and Naomi Wolf's (1991) book *The Beauty Myth*.

movements in both countries were most politically active.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I argue that the emergence of postfeminist discourses can be seen as early as 1974, and not in the 1980s or 1990s, literally in the wake of feminism's "death," as would be expected.

In total, I gathered 555 articles on the second-wave feminist movement and its members from the US *New York Time* and *Chicago Tribune*, and the UK *Times*, and *Daily Mirror*.<sup>4</sup> The first signs of a postfeminist discourse can be seen in the mid 1970s, and are part of what I labeled, a "legitimate goal, de-legitimate movement" discourse. Many of these articles constructed feminism as rigid, serious, anti-sex, difficult, radical and extremist, yet accepted feminist goals of equal rights. One of the best examples of the legitimate goal, de-legitimate movement discourse is from the *Chicago Tribune*, with an article titled "The Lady is a Closet Feminist" (Landis, March 24, 1974: D1). The article describes a woman whose husband "does the grocery shopping and the vacuuming, but she'd never admit it to her bridge group." The article goes on to state that despite her support for equal rights, "she's a model of unquestioning femininity, every hair in layered place, gleamer and lip gloss perfect, clothes not bursting her husband's budget but fashionable. No one would suspect that beneath this tranquil exterior beats the heart of a closet feminist." In this statement, the author accepts the fact that to be a feminist is some sort of deviant – not the social norm. Additionally, the author emphasizes the fact that the closet feminist is feminine, and suggests that this is in contrast to most feminists, which are presumed to be unmarried, ugly, unconventionally dressed, militant, aggressive, and

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<sup>3</sup> 1968 in the US was the year of the Miss America Pageant Protest, the beginning of feminist protests and the formation of other women's organizations. In the UK, 1968 was the year a group of fishermen's wives organised themselves in Hull for equal rights, and when female workers at the Dagenham Ford factory held a three week strike for equal pay (Bouchier 1983). More events in both countries soon followed. 1982 was the year the US Equal Rights Amendment – a piece of legislation guaranteeing equal rights and backed by feminist groups – was defeated, and many considered the movement to be dead. 1982 was also the year was around the time when the UK women's movement transferred their energy to other types of activism, most notably the peace protests at Greenham Common airfield.

<sup>4</sup> I used digital databases for all four publications. Search terms varied, and included broad phrases such as "equal rights," "equality," "equal pay," to more specific search terms which reflected some of the equal rights campaigns taking place in each country. Examples of these search terms included "equal rights amendment," "equal pay act" and "sex discrimination act."

so forth. It is important to note that this discourse goes beyond a simple “backlash.” It is not just that the article dismisses “women’s libbers,” but that it expressly legitimises several of their goals, particularly equal rights:

It has taken her a long while to get where she is. When the most recent wave of feminist consciousness raising started in the early ‘60s, the bra burning turned her and a lot of other respectable ladies off...Summarily, the women’s libbers were dismissed as women who had failed. They were unattractive, unshapely, too smart, aggressive, demanding, altogether social misfits...But slowly the feminist movement started taking on signs of recognition: The President and other politicians began carefully adding the words ‘and women’ to their speeches. Women began to enter law and medical schools in unprecedented numbers. And the media began highlighting the unique and outstanding tasks women were accomplishing outside the home. How could anyone argue with ‘equal pay for equal work?’

I find it quite enlightening that this journalist correctly identified the trend of rejecting feminists, yet accepting their goals. What this article highlights is that discourses of de-legitimacy were effective, at least to the point of demonising those who labeled themselves feminists. Yet interestingly, even as the article continues to discuss how gender roles were changing for both men and women (he does the shopping and vacuuming, she goes to the lumber yard and helps file their income tax), the article continues to identify these feminists as “closeted”:

One 45-year-old executive secretary, a closet feminist, surprised her boss of 20 years recently when she asked to be admitted to the corporation management training program. Another one, a single teacher, has submitted her application to be assistant superintendent of her school district. Both disavow any sympathy with the ‘women’s libbers.’

Here is where we really see the juxtaposition between equal rights supporters and feminists. At no point in the article does it try and explain what feminists are, who they are, or what they believe. And the article certainly doesn’t challenge the feminist stereotype. Perhaps equal rights were not demonised because they struck a chord with people. As the journalist states in this article: “How could anyone argue with ‘equal pay for equal work?’”

Several other articles also carried the discourse of legitimate goal, delegitimate movement, such as a *New York Times* article, interviewing the winner of a mother of the year contest. The article quotes the winner, Mrs. Langon, who declares, “she was ‘not particularly’ a feminist, even though she favours passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and prefers to be called a ‘newspaperwoman’ rather than a ‘housewife’” (No Byline, May 7, 1977: 54). Other women rejected the label feminists and the women’s movement as a whole because they felt that “Women’s Lib has gone off on a tangent and lost track of the really important issues” (Toll, April 30, 1972:2). Yet at the same time, the speaker notes that, “we are for women’s rights, most definitely.” It becomes clear in articles such as this that the women’s movement has come to be associated with a radical, extreme movement that does not represent what most women want. The article therefore helps to delegitimise feminism, and promote a postfeminist discourse that the movement is redundant. And while the movement might be rejected, the postfeminist discourse still allows feminist goals to be accepted.

At times, articles demonstrated a recognition that the women’s movement suffered from “an image problem” (Herman, March 18, 1979: 11). However, rather than trying to combat such images, most women chose to disassociate themselves from it. As one equal rights amendment supporter noted, “‘You’re a ‘women’s libber’ – that term makes me gag – a bad person.’ She says that’s why she became active in the ERA ratification movement six years ago.” What the prevalence of the postfeminist legitimate goals, delegitimate discourse suggests then, is the power of patriarchal ideologies in society, which serve to uphold feminine norms. This is a powerful control mechanism used to keep women in their place, keep them subservient, and prevent them from questioning such norms. You can support change, but only so much of it. And we can see it working in the 1970s as it works today. Admitting being a “feminist” today continues to be a controversial and potentially risky topic for many.

I would like to end this paper by quoting Lois W. Banner (cited in Negra 2009: 5), who noted that “Women have consistently protested against their situation, and this rebellion has led contemporaries in every decade since the 1920s to proclaim that

women have attained equality and that feminist goals have been achieved.” This quote, and the few examples given here demonstrate that scholars should not assume post-feminist discourses are something new to the second-feminist wave, nor that they emerged only after the movement was proclaimed as “dead.” If we go back to Negra’s definition of post-feminism, and how it “distorts and willfully misunderstands the political and social goals of feminism, and trades on the notion of feminism as rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist”, we can see that the examples I gave from these articles certainly fit in.

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*Gendered 'cover stories' or why girls can't game*

This paper explores the concept of a postfeminist cover story in relation to gender and technology. Drawing on interviews with adult women gamers and female teenage participants in digital media workshops organised by the BBC, it explores what it *means* to claim to be technologically competent in relation to gender. I argue that the theoretical frameworks provided by Diane Negra and Angela McRobbie – that of a postfeminist 'cover story' (Negra) and the notion of 'disarticulation' (McRobbie) - provide useful ways of approaching these claims and articulations. Focussing specifically on the female populations of the research projects, the paper demonstrates some interesting cross-generational similarities in terms of claims about competency in relation to technology. Taken together, they suggest a worrying social and cultural trend which continually emphasises what Valerie Walkerdine has claimed as the 'habitual "feminine" position of incompetence' (2006: 526) - position which seems to influence actual engagement with that technology.

The paper draws on a number of conversations with adult women and teenage girls over the past 5 years, which were undertaken as part of two different research projects both looking at new digital media. The first was concerned with addressing mediations with gaming technology in domestic contexts in adult shared households; and the second focussed on teenage user generated content (UGC) through a BBC initiative which incorporates online facilities ( a website with message boards, content showcases and 'how to' sections) and offline facilities (UK wide local workshops). What is interesting about both of these projects as the paper explains, is precisely the similarities (despite different aims of the projects) in terms of articulations and comments regarding technology.

The title relates primarily to Diane Negra's suggestion that postfeminism works as a kind of cover story for what is actually the continuation of more traditional notions of femininity and patriarchal power relations. As she suggests:

Postfeminism broadly functions as a cover story for the reality that women's status and security remain in many ways tenuous and family value paradigms sort femininity into categories of values and abjection' (2009: 44)

Her notion of a cover story is useful for this paper because of what it suggests about a conscious or unconscious *covering over* of what are actually potentially pleasurable experiences. Indeed, I argue that the women and teenagers are either covering for competent gaming abilities, or covering for the potentiality of them *not* being competent. Further, the cover story on which they make these claims is that of gender: an invocation of an essential femaleness. They all claim to speak as female, and as *therefore* necessarily excluded from the choice demographic of technological ability. In turn, these claims demonstrate precisely what is at stake here in the easy assumption of femininity and consequently (and obviously for them) a position of exclusion.

I also want to take the notion of a cover story further, however, and suggest that there is also a narrative being offered here – a story which is constantly being performed in conscious and unconscious ways. This story, this narrative, which is a performance of femininity,<sup>5</sup> and a story of a long term relationship with technology going back to childhood, is an ongoing cover for what are actually complex engagements with technology. The stories these women gamers and teenagers offer are complex performances which actually work to evoke and re-inscribe more traditional notions of femininity in a similar way to Negra's assertions of the discourse of postfeminism. Finally, I want to suggest this is a negotiation *made possible* by the contradictory discourse of postfeminism, in particular the re-inscription of an essential notion of femininity exacerbated by the discourse of gender choice, gender performance and neo-liberal discourse which acknowledges

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<sup>5</sup> And here I am thinking of Len Ang and Joke Hermes assertion that 'articulations of [gender] have to be made again and again, day after day, and the fact that the same articulations are so often repeated... is not a matter of course; it is, rather, a matter of active re-production, continual rearticulation.' (Ang and Hermes, 1991: 319)

that gender *is* a performance and therefore the women and teenagers choose to perform a particular kind of femininity (and in some senses we can see feminism 'taken into account' (McRobbie, 2007: 28) here). Finally I also want to suggest that this cover story has quite severe consequences particularly in relation to how these relations with technology can then come to be realised.

There are a number of theoretical underpinnings for this paper, then, which emerge from a recent body of work on postfeminism (Negra 2009, Tasker and Negra (ed.) 2008, Angela McRobbie 2009), and which provide not only a critical and sceptical account of postfeminism, but also provide useful ways to think through the claims and comments by the women and teenagers in relation to the wider discourse of postfeminism. It also draws on Valerie Walkerdine's recent work on young girls and gaming (2006) which has clear resonances with the interviewees represented here, especially in terms of what Walkerdine has called the 'complex performances' (2006:519) the girls of her study enter into in order to negotiate technology.

Lorna (30) tells me that she doesn't play *Pro Evolution* because 'obviously it's a football game and for the boys'. She tells me that even if she did play, Joe (her housemate) would interrupt her gaming: '[he'd] basically just describe what to do'. Chloe (27) tells me she doesn't play *Grand Theft Auto* because 'it's a boy thing' and therefore 'not for me.' These are just two examples of the responses the women gamers offered when I asked them which games they were currently playing. They articulate, and introduce, some of the complex negotiations with, and convolutions entered into, in order to explain gaming. They are both actively playing these games but the position they both choose to speak from, and indeed this happened time and time again, is a position of *exclusion*, (both Lorna and Chloe are excluded from a game which is either 'for the boys' or 'a boy thing'). Furthermore, these are positions of exclusion based on the fact they're *women*. I've argued elsewhere, that this claim to speak from a position of a woman, can be seen as affirmative in that it stakes out a position from which to speak about the technology (see Thornham, 2008: 127-143). However, entwined in this positioning is a re-inscription and reintroduction of gender and power relations which return them to more traditional

notions of femininity. What is more, in their claim of, and to, a gendered position, they also evoke a notion of gender as natural and as essential, and which exacerbates the tenuous nature of their position as both excluded and as competent and frequent gamers. Indeed, Jess takes this gender difference even further in her explanation of the genre of the platform game, telling me that the design of the games are set up to accommodate a natural masculine characteristic – that of perseverance and competitiveness – over what she sees as a more feminine aptitude of navigation and compromise:

The guys will carry on going and carry on going until they kill the monster, whereas girls will do it for a while and then think ‘well isn’t there another thing I could do?’ and then go around and see if there’s a side chapter or something else. It’s jut not for girls, it’s not designed for girls. (Jess)

These claims to, and of, and excluded position in relation to technology were also a frequent iteration for the teenagers involved in the digital media workshops run by the BBC. Indeed, the comments they offered on their choice of workshop demonstrates a similar rhetoric of exclusion based on the fact they’re girls and therefore technology incompetent or ‘just’ not interested. Along with the usual claims of disinterest (‘VJ-ing is more for the boys’, ‘it’s more for the boys [game workshop] that though’) which seem to map almost exactly onto the comments of the adult women gamers, was a further explanation which explicitly connected technological inability or incompetence with gender. Many explanations included the phrase ‘I’m such a *girl*’ which was clearly meant as a disparaging comment on technological abilities. One girl who had attended a radio production workshop told me she didn’t find it that enjoyable because, as she suggested, ‘I can’t work the dials! I’m rubbish and it. She [her friend] was like, ‘you’re rubbish!’ I’m *such* a girl!’ Here her own incompetency which is based on her gender is also acknowledged by her (presumably more competent) friend who tells her she’s rubbish.

The other noticeable element about the responses across generations is the reference to the *social*, or more specifically, friends and housemates. If the first cover story, the women and girls offer is a position of exclusion based on their gender, then the second cover story is a positioning which places the women and teenagers primarily in a social relationship. The adult women gamers frequently

refer to other housemates in their description of the games they're playing. Lorna talks about Joe's instruction, for example, and Sara (27) goes further when she suggests that the very reason for her playing, is to integrate herself socially with her housemates:

I pretend I can't work out what to do. And I don't bother to try to improve as a gamer because that's my role as the Girl. They're always telling me what to do. But that's boys isn't it? They have to instruct you... its how I *choose* to bond with my housemates, but it doesn't change how I interact with them. I'm still 'the Girl' and don't know what I'm doing. (Sara)

In both these accounts by Lorna and Sara (and we can also situate Jess' comments here too), gaming is not related to the competitive aims of the game – it's not about winning – it's about appeasement of, and interaction with, housemates. Hannah (24), for example, tells me that even though she finds the figure of Lara Croft and the construction of female avatars more generally 'quite offensive', she'd 'probably play just to keep Simon [her housemate] happy'.

The teenage girls also consistently prioritised the importance and influence of their friends in deciding what to do and which workshops to go to. It is more important for them to demonstrate a shared interest with their friends rather than going to a workshop they want and therefore being classed as a 'widow'. Many of the teenagers suggested they would have liked to have gone to a different workshop, but made a decision based on the group opinion:

G1: I was just following these two. I wanted to do VJ-ing but then I saw all those boys and thought 'No way!'

G3: I wanted to do Street Dance but I didn't want to be a widow.

I: So why did you go to this workshop then?

G1: Coz our friend wanted to go

G2: I like radio and the music best so we gonna come back and do the radio one tomorrow, listen to some tunes

For *both* the teenage girls and adult women, it is housemates or friends which are prioritized. The characteristics, concerns, and traits they consistently outline as

important are those traditionally associated with the feminine, furthermore, it is a femininity which, in a similar vein to the findings of Valerie Walkerdine's recent research, 'displays care, co-operation, concern, and sensitivity to others' (2006: 520). Further, the cover story both the adult women and teenagers offer to explain their choices, reproduces a dichotomy which sees femininity on one side (ascribed with such qualities as sociality, cooperation and care), and technology on the other (ascribed with competitiveness, aggression, violence, nerdy or geek interest). In both age groups, this is a distancing from the technology, from the logics and rationale of the game (winning, competitiveness) or workshop (becoming adept and technologically competent), and a refiguring of these elements into a *social* setting where friends or housemates can be prioritised.

For the adult women gamers, this creates quite an impossible dichotomy within which they can also never *perform* competent gamer either. In the negotiation between technology and femininity, they choose the latter, which then interestingly becomes unsatisfactory for them. Again, in a similar vein to Walkerdine's research into young girls and gaming, it is the negotiation of competitiveness and appeasement which is most remarkable (see Walkerdine, 2006: 521). Again, it is worth highlighting that Walkerdine's research is based on *young* girls, which suggests something really interesting about the prevalence of such gendered positionings and negotiations. Further, it is also worth noting that there IS a desire to win here. Lorna tells me on many occasions, that despite Joe always telling her what to do, 'I actually scored one of the best scores that he's ever seen anyone score in ISS' (1.3). This is pride and competitiveness, and like Sara's reflective commentary works to undermine their initial position, and unpick the idea of them as incompetent. They can game, they enjoy gaming, they know what is going on; but the performance of incompetency is a choice they make because they continually prioritise the social situation. Lorna's boast, her affirmation that she can win, that she *is* competent –demonstrates the complexities of these negotiations – as well as what is at stake with either positioning.

Indeed, what is at stake here relates to the actual gaming scenarios where the negotiation between competitiveness and social appeasement or integration is most clearly demonstrated. As these transcripts from the recordings of gameplay suggest, the practice of gaming does not resolve these issues: it brings them to the fore around notions of performance:

Sara: I've made a complete arse of this!  
[laughter]  
Sara: oh it is excruciating!  
[laughter]  
Sara: I've made a complete arse of this!  
[laughter]  
Sara: I thought it was a bike and it was a man!  
[laughter]  
Ian: oh dear. I don't like that.  
Sara: this is awful  
Claire: come on! You're going to die!! Quick! Quick!  
Sara: this is the least amount of fun I've ever had.  
[gunfire]

Rach: oh god! People are beeping at me! Do I beat him up or is he going to take my car?  
Rob: press triangle to get in the car  
Rach: hey. There we go!  
Rob: 'X' is to accelerate  
Rach: oh I'm on the train track! Oops. Is that a train?! What do I do?!  
Rob: and that 'S'. see that 'S'?  
Rach: yeah  
Rob: on the map? That's where you've got your next mission  
Rach: is it? Oh god  
Rob: should you desire to take it [leaves room]  
Rach: ohh. Shit. Oh! That's water! I thought it was grass!  
Rob: [comes back in] oh. You're dead. Get out  
Rach: how?!  
Rob: press triangle.

Both of these extracts are performances of incompetence, especially considering both women are adept at the games they're playing and know what each button on the controller does. More importantly perhaps, these performances are also highly entertaining, and are in many ways managements of the social situations. Indeed, both performances maintain and prioritise a interaction with other housemates rather than competitiveness, by keeping everyone in the living room involved in it. Fundamentally, of course, these are also performances of inability, of a lack of knowledge, and of what Walkerdine has termed the 'habitual "feminine" position of incompetence' (2006: 526).

All of these quotes from the adult women gamers suggest in one way or another (and these are just snapshots over a five year period) that in the same way that the teenage girls talk about a more general technological incompetency, the adult women are continually claiming and performing roles which invoke a much more traditional notion of femininity most obviously as one of incompetency with technology. But they all also talk from an excluded position of femininity, which allows them to claim a certain kind of knowledge, albeit one where technology has no place. The cover story, which postfeminism somewhat exacerbates, is one of an essential notion of femininity which 'naturally' excludes them from the technology they're discussing. Indeed, hidden in the rhetoric of gender performance and choice which is what is popularly celebrated as the outcomes of feminism, there nevertheless remains the body – a female body and a whole one at that. The rhetoric of both a postmodernist discourse and the notion of (economic, gender, sexual) choice which evokes the successes of feminism, is either acknowledged and simultaneously dismissed (see Tasker and Negra, 2007: 5-13), or re-figured as an individual and personal claim. In turn, this creates a distance from the politics of both feminism and postmodernism by insisting that any statement should be read as a personal opinion. It is the affirmation of femininity as a personal choice, and as the natural and the common-sense (in a Gramscian sense) position from which to speak, which is therefore emphasised. The importance of housemates or friends similarly returns us to traditional characteristics ascribed to femininity (as Walkerdine suggests), whilst also reiterating the importance of social cohesion which technology may *facilitate* but never *dominate*. Although the women and teenage girls *can* comment on technology, they nevertheless re-produce traditional power dynamics which reinforce a more traditional notion of femininity while also producing it as reflective of present day scenarios (they produce it and bring it up-to-date so to speak). This means, of course, that while we *could* read this as an affirmation and claim of a position from which to speak, the power dynamics which it continues to enforce restrict actual mediations with those technologies.

The final cover story I want to offer relates more specifically to what Angela McRobbie has termed feminism 'taken into account' (2007: 28). Indeed, I suggested

in the opening paragraphs of the paper that some of the comments articulated a more conscious awareness of what we could perhaps call a feminist politics. It is important to highlight, however, that these articulations were only noticeable in the adult women (and not the teenage girls). Furthermore, such articulations centred on discussions of the images of the female avatars which, of course, position the women in a far more comfortable and acceptable position as media *consumers*. Indeed it is interesting that the position of critic and consumer is acceptable, but the practice of technological engagement or mediation, is not. Talking from a position as consumer allows the women to offer a critique of the constructed and unrepresentative images of women avatars. However, such criticisms were carefully bracketed with proclamations about normative gaming practices to suggest that, although the images were problematic, they wouldn't necessarily prevent gameplay. The criticism of the constructed and unrepresentative images of women in the media, does, on the one hand, reiterate one of successes of feminism.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, we can also see the discourse of postfeminism at work here, in the simultaneous acknowledgement and dismissal of such critiques:

Sara: I think it's more marketed at boys and I guess that could change. Just how, the way it looks has been blokey, black, sleek machine sat in the corner of the room bursting entrails of wires. And the games are more blokey [pause]

H: So are you, I mean you said *Micro Machines* was good because you get to be a woman as well

Sara: yeah (laughs)

H: is that important to you?

Sara: *it's not hugely important but it does suggest that maybe the makers have thought that it appeals to boys and girls. I mean you can't be a woman on GTA or whatever and something like Lara Croft is just designed to be a male fantasy*

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as Rosalind Gill suggests, one of the initial aims of feminism was to criticise the 'idealized, perfect images of unattainable femininity' (2007:74.) As the Spare Rib reader also suggests, 'these images confine women to stereotyped roles, such as the mother who nurtures, the wife who nags, the object of male desire, or the jealous, overbearing mother-in-law' *SR. 64, November 1977* (in Rowe (ed.) 1982:25)

*figure (laughs at herself). Yeah I guess it does matter to me. I wouldn't want to play Lara Croft I just think she's so wrong. And I always choose the woman thing on Micro Machines (laughs).*

Sara initially constructs the playstation box as a phallic object not designed for her pleasure. She also reiterates her exclusion from gaming because of the genre of the games. When I ask her to develop her statement, and suggest that she interrogate her own gaming practices, she begins to laugh at her statements, undermining and trivializing what she is saying. The moment where she moves from consumer, able to critique, to a more personal account of her own pleasures and activities; she ceases to claim a critical stance and instead develops a much more personal narrative. I see this movement as one from consumer (able to draw on a rich discourse of the construction of images) to female gamer (positioned in a far more personal and corporeal relationship with the game). What is interesting, of course, is that Sara concludes by suggesting that the constructed avatar is important to her, but only because of her own (non-political) preference. Laughter is used here to soften her comment, as well as dissipate and feminize any suggestion of actual anger or criticism. Hannah also initially criticizes the figure of Lara Croft and the *Final Fantasy* avatars. But, like Sara, carefully re-inscribes this criticism to suggest that although she is aware of the problems of such constructions as a consumer, the important element in gaming is the appeasement of her housemate Simon. It is the social, once again, along with the more traditionally feminine virtues of care and sensitivity to others, which are ultimately expressed:

*Hannah: I actually find the female characters quite offensive. Like, I'd not say it to Simon who has got all the games, but the Final Fantasy women and Lara Croft - you know what I mean? All these games with skinny, tiny kick-ass women, they're supposed to be liberating. They just annoy me*

*H: would it stop you playing the game?*

*Hannah: I'd probably play – just to keep Simon happy. I wouldn't buy it though.*

Both of these comments continue to enforce the rhetoric of sensitivity to her other housemates. They also acknowledge the problematic construction of the discourse of gaming ('black sleek machine') and the avatars ('skinny, tiny' 'so wrong') but then either laugh at the suggestion this could influence reaction (and undermine and dismiss this notion) or claim it would not prevent gaming.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting that Hannah reiterates her power as a consumer here, arguing that she *wouldn't* buy the game even if she played it. This again suggests that there is a position here as a consumer which allows for the exercising of critical taste and judgement, which a more personal narrative does not. The extracts above also seem in direct comparison with the comment below where Jess defends the figure of the female avatar. Here, Jess seems to take Hannah and Sara's stance on step further, defending the construction of the female Final Fantasy avatars as stereotyped objects of desire as common-sense. Here, the avatars are thin because they are active, young because they are adventurous, and real in the visibility of such representations elsewhere:

Jess: I really like Rikku... *so there's Yuna, who's supposed to be very naive and save the world. Not too keen. Never liked the good girls. Rikku, who is a bit of a monkey. And Paine who is mysterious and seems to know all the baddies. I like Rikku: she's like a monkey. Rikku's about sixteen and Yuna's supposed to be about eighteen I think... well that is the age isn't it? Between sixteen and thirty is the age you go of and do stupid adventurous things. You couldn't have somebody who was about ninety! That would be a bit ridiculous! They would be able to do any of the funny kicks!*

H: and what do you reckon about the fact they're all white and skinny?

Jess: err, well I have to say, if I did as much running as they did, I'd be skinny

H: [laughs]

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<sup>7</sup> This is also in keeping with Aphra Kerr's research where female computer gamers expressed awareness that gaming was popularly perceived as gendered male, but claimed it did not prevent them gaming (see Kerr: 2003.)

Jess: what?! They run everywhere! I enjoy beating the bad bosses! It's funny!  
And you can make them dress up in silly clothes

H: ok, so you enjoy dressing up, dressing them up

Jess: and killing people!

H: so it's kind of like Barbie but with a very angry edge?

Jess: yeah! But without the ridiculous body image

H: of Barbie?

Jess: of Barbie

H: you don't think they're as bad?

*Jess: well no, they're just thin women! They're just skinny women. I know lots of skinny women*

Jess defends her attachment to the *FF* (Final Fantasy) avatars in the face of my questioning, arguing that of course the women would be skinny if they were this active. She refuses at this point to recognize that it is a constructed game (and images) she is talking about, and discusses the avatars as they were 'real' people, telling me that she 'knows lots of skinny women'. It is a defence of Rikku, Paine and Yuna's body shape and dress as both common sense and 'natural'. There is little engagement with the notion that the avatars are constructed, or that they are represented as such to present a particular fantasy and representation of femininity. What is interesting, of course, is that, like Hannah and Sara, Jess *does* acknowledge that there is a politics ascribing *Barbie* a 'ridiculous' body image. This recognition, however, is completely divorced from any discussion about the *FF* avatars. For Jess, pleasure and politics are completely distinct.

Indeed, by comparison with Sara and Hannah's comments, Jess' comments suggest a refusal to enter into a critique or analysis of the figures on screen. Quite simply, she likes them, she identifies with them, and she is unwilling to discuss her pleasure in

any way other than her own choice and preference. Even here, then, we see (in the discussion of Barbie) a feminism 'taken into account' (McRobbie, 2007: 28) in the separation of the political and pleasure.

I want to end with a term McRobbie borrows from Laclau and Mouffe (1985): the notion of 'disarticulation' which is a term McRobbie borrows to talk about disarticulating feminism. She draws on the notion of disarticulation in order to discuss how feminism has become 'undone' (2009: 24-30). As she suggests, the intersection of feminism with other 'movements' (such as psychoanalytic understandings of identity and post-structuralism) produced a notion of identity as predicated on 'unstable and historically contingent elements' (2009: 25). In turn, this more fluid and unstable concept of identity is more susceptible to influence from other movements concerned with addressing inequality and identity. Consequently, the (feminist) movements entered into a 'chain of equivalence' in relation to other movements in order to gain a wider political and social appeal/value. The result of which, she argues, is the 'constant modifying [of] their own political identities and their 'horizons of intelligibility' (McRobbie, 2009: 25).

I want to suggest that what we see with these adult women and teenage girls is in some senses, a negotiation with, and awareness of a feminist politics in the figure of the avatar, in their exclusion, and in their competitiveness which also allows them space and an identity from which to speak. On one level, this allows them to negotiate the power relations in order to speak about the technology. However, in claiming the personal and embodied position of female, they enter into a chain of equivalence with what Walkerdine terms as the 'habitual "feminine" position of incompetence' (2006: 526). The double bind of authority being grounded in a problematic essential and embodied notion of femininity which simultaneously allows them some autonomy to speak about the technology, but also then frames any subsequent articulations, means that these articulations become *disarticulations* in McRobbie's (and Laclau and Mouffe's) sense because they end up not only reclaiming, but also rearticulating traditional notions of femininity. This is problematic because it's not just an articulation, it also limits the kinds of possible

relations, pleasures, and mediations with technology that these women and girls **can** experience not least because they are consistently producing and performing gendered roles of technological incompetence and sensitivity to others.

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*Can self-representation challenge representations in 'postfeminist' times?*

## **Introduction**

In this paper, the 'Terrible Girl' of our panel title means me, for *assuming* feminism is an ongoing project, as well as describing the girls and women who represent themselves in ways which might be understood as challenging current dominant popular representations of the lives, interests, cares, expectations of girls and women.

In her Introduction to her (depressingly convincing) book Diane Negra writes that:

*What a Girl Wants?* is about a popular culture that has just about forgotten feminism despite constant, generally negative invocations of (often anonymous) feminists. To the extent that she is visible at all, the contemporary feminist appears as a narcissistic minority group member whose interests and actions threaten the family and a social consensus that underwrites powerful romanticizations of American 'community' (Negra, 2009: 2)

I wanted to use the occasion of the publication of Negra's book to consider how my (doctoral) research on the mediation of self-representation in projects that invited produced and displayed self-representations by members of the public in the UK might offer challenges to the dominant representations of women and girls which Negra writes about, and which are of course not limited to the US context (Thumim 2008, forthcoming 2009). By self-representation I mean when people are representing themselves, rather than being represented by others (media professionals of one kind or another, for example). People are making textual representations, that counter dominant ones, that represent differently, or that represent what or who is not being represented in the dominant popular forms (e.g. Corner 1994).

I have put 'postfeminist' in inverted commas because I want to question the implication in the phrase 'postfeminist' that there once were feminist times. In her book *Negra* describes a range of representations across popular culture as 'postfeminist'. These are designated 'postfeminist' because they invite the audience to collude with the idea that feminist concerns are no longer appropriate and to usher in a set of concerns and aspirations for women which reject feminist agendas. I am concerned that taking up the term 'postfeminist' implies a) that feminism was ever a united project, and b) that feminism was ever championed by dominant popular cultural forms. There were struggles and ambiguities previously and they continue albeit in new formulations.

For what immediately arises is the question of the audience: who is viewing the representations that *Negra* refers to? How are they viewers negotiating the material? And *Negra* acknowledges this question:

What I do not do in this book is provide an account of the ways in which individual consumers negotiate the content of postfeminist representations (as many surely do) nor do I investigate the potential 'open spaces' that may be available in some postfeminist texts to facilitate spectatorial negotiation. The reason for this is that I believe that the overwhelming ideological impact that is made by an accumulation of postfeminist cultural material is the reinforcement of conservative norms as the ultimate 'best choices' in women's lives (*Negra*, 2009:4).

To be clear; I am by no means arguing that this overwhelming 'reinforcement of conservative norms' is not taking place. But I am interested in considering how these 'postfeminist texts' are challenged, in reception, certainly, but also in the making and displaying of self-representations.

Questions of audience negotiation in reception contexts of course also arise with regard to self-representations: who is viewing and how are they receiving the material. Moreover, who (how many, or how few) are producing self-representations? Where are they displayed? What resources are backing them? Key examples in *Negra's* book are Hollywood Chick flicks of various kinds, produced by a dominant global industry. Can self-representations produced by individuals or public

broadcasting projects, or museums, for example, challenge dominant popular cultural texts?

It would be both simplistic and idealistic to think in terms of regressive mainstream representations and progressive self-representations: there is always a cross over as each influences the other. And the audience reception is as important here as it was in the reception of romance novels in Radway's celebrated study. I suggest that the notion of a process of mediation offers an approach which might allow us to take account of ambiguities in representation and in self-representation as they exist, and are negotiated, in daily life. In his 1999 book, *Why Study the Media*, Roger Silverstone argued that media scholars should focus on processes of mediation rather than on media (Silverstone, 1999). Of course the term 'mediation' is currently being deployed in a number of ways and I want to clarify my use of the term and why I think it is important for the question I am addressing here.

The concept of mediation foregrounds the processes by which meanings are produced. Mediation emphasizes that meaning making is negotiated, open-ended and ongoing and involves institutions, technologies and people (see for example, Corner, 1994; Couldry, 2006; Fornas, 2000; Martin-Barbero, 1993; Silverstone, 1999; Thompson, 1995). Deploying the concept of mediation means starting with the assumption that, whatever our particular research focus in a given instance, the production, circulation and reception of representations take place in complex contexts which are also, of course, at the same time processes of the exercise and negotiation of power. This observation is arguably more important than ever when the boundaries between who is an audience member and who is a producer appear to be challenged in some sites at some moments, at least.

So I do mean my title as a question: can self-representation challenge representation? Lurking in this question are audiences and producers: who makes the challenge, who frames the challenge, who receives, negotiates, rejects, accepts, the challenge? Self-representations *are* being made. Indeed, arguably, self-representations are becoming normalized: you *must* represent yourself if you want to be part of social networking sites like Facebook, for example. And to return to the

idea of ambiguity – we can find self-representations that repeat and concur with the dominant ideological messages detailed in Negra’s book; for example young women representing themselves in soft porn poses on their own Facebook page. But we can also find others. Now I want to give three examples of self-representations that challenge ‘postfeminist’ representations.

*Capture Wales* is an award-winning digital storytelling project, which began as a partnership between the New Media Department at BBC Wales and Cardiff University. Mobile monthly five day workshops all over Wales between 2001 and 2008 began with storytelling workshops, moved to training members of the public to use new media tools to make short experiential montages ‘digital stories’<sup>8</sup>. These ‘stories’ are archived on the BBC dedicated website and many also appeared on the National early evening News magazine television programme, Wales Today and on the BBC’s digital interactive television programming. There was no remit as to what the stories should be about other than that they should be about experience and told from a first person perspective (the mediation involved here is beyond the scope of this paper but is discussed elsewhere, see for example, Thumim, 2008 and forthcoming, 2009). The *Capture Wales* website states:

Everyone has a story to tell. All over Wales, people are making Digital Stories about real-life experiences and each story is as individual as the person who made it. Each Digital Story is made by the storyteller themselves, using his or her own photos, words and voice (Capture Wales website).

Rhiannon Morgan’s story, *A night at the Dog and Duck*, is one among hundreds made during the period in which the *Capture Wales* project ran. This story is a montage of drawings and photographs and a voice over remembering nights out spent with girlfriends as younger women and the ‘sealing of friendship’. The last words in the voice over state:

With a bit of lipstick and powder to the nose, we'd dust each other down and prop each other ready to face the world outside. Then after a burger and a pee in a doorway, we'd

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<sup>8</sup> CW built on the Digital Storytelling form developed at the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California, by Joe Lambert and colleagues. See URL (consulted Jan 2008) <http://www.storycenter.org/>. See Lambert, (2006) [2002].

go our separate ways not knowing that in sharing these adolescent nights out, we were sealing a friendship - for life.

This story challenges 'postfeminist' representations in a number of ways. First, Rhiannon speaks for herself in her own words. Second, she has chosen to emphasize female friendship not as secondary to heterosexual romance but as what she wants to dwell on as a story in itself. Third, the story presents getting drunk, 'pee[ing] in a doorway', and having fun as normal, not pathological and not to be framed by any kind of moralistic conclusion at a time when for example, young women and drinking has been the subject of a moral media panic in the UK. Indeed the editorial on the website warns users: 'This digital story discusses adult issues which some people might find offensive..'. Here then we have pleasure, female friendship, and self-definition. Lastly I would like to draw attention to the use of drawing in the digital story – this in itself seems to me to be a resistance to dominant ways of picturing women and women's bodies.

My second example is a young woman called 'Kimberley' who participated in a project at the Museum of London in 2003 called *London's Voices 16-19*. *London's Voices* was a Heritage Lottery Funded oral history project at the Museum of London which aimed to build the museum's oral history archive to better reflect the diverse population of London and to experiment with the collection and display of oral history at the museum; including developing the use of the internet as an exhibitory space for the museum. *16-19* was, as the title suggests, a group of projects which involved young people representing themselves in a range of forms and using a range of technologies, for display on a dedicated website on the museums web pages. The group of which 'Kimberley' was a member had chosen to learn photography and the remit of their project was to represent their local area as they saw fit. I want to tell you about a key moment in my interview with this group of young people. I sat with the young people as they talked me through the photographs they had taken as part of the project. In so doing they addressed media representation and, I think, rejected hyperbolic, radicalized and sexualized media representations as defining them and their friends:

'Kimberley': This is 'the difference between black and white'. [*Pointing to a photograph of two boys - one black and one white- sitting on a wall with graffiti in the background,*] *Laughs.*

Interviewer: What is the difference?

'Kimberley': I'm joking, that's my brother. And then there's the graffiti.

Group interview with members of a North London youth group composed of working class young people from a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Participants in *London's Voices'* sub-project, 16 - 19.

Here I want to observe that first, 'Kimberley' speaks as photographer, not subject, and certainly not object, thereby arguably rejecting the dominant position for young women in 'postfeminist' times. Second, 'Kimberley' plays with me, the interviewer. She is describing one of her own photographs and employs the kind of slogan found in mainstream media representations: 'the difference between black and white'. When asked to elaborate, 'Kimberley' shows that she had me fooled: 'I'm joking'. Finally she powerfully undercuts the kind of labeling she has referred to by humanizing the people in the photograph, and in so doing challenges dominant media discourse *and*, moreover, anyone who might take it seriously, such as, in this case me, the interviewer.

My final example of challenging self-representation is an ongoing series of to-camera short interventions on *YouTube* called *Friday Feminist Fuck You* which are made by members of an American group called *Feministing* but which are posted to *YouTube*, allowing, as you know, anyone to post video responses as well as written comments. The titles of some recent recordings indicate the kinds of topics addressed:

Friday Feminist Fuck You: Fox and Other Race-Dumb Outlets

[Friday Feminist Fuck You: Dr Laura](#)

[Friday Feminist Fuck You: Anti-feminism in the media](#)

[Friday Feminist Fuck You: Academy Awards](#)

[Friday Feminist Fuck You: Grover Cleveland High](#)

I want to note that these rejections are here in these 'postfeminist' times, to be stumbled across on *Youtube*. Of course we should also note that the verbal comment 'responses' contain support and agreement as well as the misogyny you

would expect to find. Mediation processes are power struggles. And yes, these videos are buried in Youtube, not screened at the local multiplex. Nevertheless I want to argue they need to be taken into account as a third example, and as an explicit challenge to the fact that in dominant representations, as Negra rightly observes: 'the contemporary feminist [appears] as a narcissistic minority group member whose interests and actions threaten the family ..' (Negra, 2009: 2).

A wide range of people, practices, technologies and institutions are involved in the mediation processes shaping the three examples of self-representation I have sketched here. Members of the public participate in workshops and bring their own experiences and stories to those workshops. Producers, researchers, curators, community workers all facilitate the actual process of production in which the self-representations are made. Press and marketing personnel for the institutions promote the projects that invite the public to make self-representations. Senior managers discuss and highlight at internal and external events the fact that projects like these are taking place in the institutions. Middle managers, like exhibitions committees (in the museum) and scheduling personnel (in the BBC) decide what if any display slots these self-representations will be given beyond the web. YouTube provides the platform and frames the videos posted by the women involved in making Friday Feminist Fuck You's. Mediation processes, and of course power imbalances, between for instance the PR department promoting the feature film *The Stepford Wives*<sup>9</sup> and the PR department at BBC Wales must prevent us from too easy a celebration of the interventions I have discussed. Nevertheless they are interventions against the dominant representations of women. And they are circulating symbolic forms. We should also note at this juncture, the centrality of the internet in the three examples I have given here, and so emphasize the role of developments in digital technology in the processes of mediation at hand. Although, as many scholars have noted, we should also be wary of a celebratory approach to so called Web 2.0, a form in which the myriad sites enabling self-representation are largely profit-driven. Indeed the 'amateur aesthetic' (Atton, 2002) is so widely

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<sup>9</sup> *The Stepford Wives* is just one of the examples Negra mentions.

associated with participatory online culture that it has now been co-opted by powerful media institutions. Jenkins gives the example of Astroturf:

..fake grassroots media - through which very powerful groups attempt to mask themselves as powerless in order to gain greater credibility within participatory culture. [In the past](#), these powerful interests would have been content to exert their control over broadcast and mass market media but now, they often have to mask their power in order to operate within network culture. (Jenkins, 2007).

And Jenkins again, in his ninth proposition towards a cultural theory of YouTube, reminds us that inequalities and prejudices, and we can add, resulting symbolic violence, are by no means absent from the participatory space of YouTube:

9. YouTube teaches us that a participatory culture is not necessarily a [diverse culture](#)....minorities are grossly under-represented - at least among the most heavily viewed videos on YouTube, which still tend to come most often from white middle class males. If we want to see a more "democratic" culture, we need to explore what mechanisms might encouraged greater diversity in who participates, whose work gets seen, and what gets valued within the new participatory culture." (ibid.)

## **Conclusion**

If self-representations have the potential to challenge dominant representations then spaces in which they are developed, produced and displayed must be fostered - globally. It might seem that publicly funded initiatives that facilitate self-representation are unnecessary with the internet and the possibilities for self-representation it engenders that do not require workshops and training and invitations. But in fact research does continue to show (my own included) that publicly funded initiatives like *Capture Wales* and *London's Voices* do facilitate self-representation by people who would not otherwise represent themselves in public spaces, despite the existence of Web 2.0. The processes of representing yourself, my empirical work suggested, is (or can be) itself political action; the practice of which effects how participants see themselves. Consequently we might speculate that such practice must effect how women see themselves, and therefore how they react to

popular dominant representations<sup>10</sup>. Perhaps self-representations should in the context of Diane Negra's analysis of dominant cultural representations be understood as a tool. But I must end with a cautionary note; one of Negra's final remarks is this:

In this book I have sought to remind readers that there are social concerns and constituencies that cannot be addressed through the solipsism of self-care and the rectitude of family values (Negra, 2009: 153).

We should note that representation of the self can also be deployed in the service of the currently pervasive idea that everything is reducible to self care and individual identity. In this way, for example, reality television contestants are called on to represent themselves and this is not self-representation as self-definition but rather laying social problems at the door of the individual's project of self-care. Or, indeed to a less explicit degree, projects that aim to facilitate the telling of the self: like *Capture Wales* and like *London's Voices* can end up reproducing this same problematic message that self-care is the most constructive way to address social concerns (see Thumim, 2007). Thus to return to my earlier point it is never a case of progressive self-representations and regressive dominant representations but rather we are faced with representations produced and circulating in processes of mediation which might sometimes be both potentially progressive and potentially reactionary and which require analytical attention to determine how they are actually working.

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<sup>10</sup> On this point see the Plenary Panel discussion of Action at the Media, Communication and Humanity Conference at LSE, September 21-23rd 2008. Plenary: Old Theatre, Grd Fl, Old Building. Media Power and Strategic Action. Sandra Ball-Rokeach: Bridging Ethnic Communities: Moving From Theory to Action. John Downing: Uncommunicative Partners: Social Movement Media Analysis and Radical Educators  
Carolyn Marvin: Communicative Space and Geometrics of Power in Lhasa: Old Technologies Resisting the New.  
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*Subversing Transformations:  
Postfeminism and Progression Narratives in Make-over Television*

Diane Negra, in *What a Girl Wants?* (2009), emphasises that her definition of postfeminism applies only to a very narrow cultural development in US film and television. Her interest lies with popular narratives in these two media, and in particular with narratives directed at women. Crucially she does not attempt to provide a totalising account, but rather map 'the paradoxes which so often emerge in postfeminist culture' (2009: 6).

Negra highlights that much popular culture she analyses 'engage the postfeminist promise of coming back to oneself in a process of coming home' (2009: 7). This emphasis on the revelation of the true self and the transformation towards the 'original' self is a theme the reader encounters at several times. Thus, Negra writes: 'Popular culture insistently asserts that if women can productively manage home, time, work, and their commodity choices, they will be rewarded with a more authentic, intact, and achieved self' (2009: 5).

There are two things here that I think are more widely applicable and that I want to draw attention to. One is the emphasis on transformation and hence progression narratives. Postfeminism, Negra essentially argues, keeps repeating a mantra of narratives that emphasise the progression for women from their over-worked and under-achieved and -developed selves to an experience of achievement, origin and leisure. This, I would argue is also very prominent in contemporary British television with a main target audience of women. The second point Negra highlights is that this progression narrative is closely connected to the idea of reward. Thus, the progression narrative is not only one that is based on modernist (and often

masculinist) assumptions of natural progression to a better state; rather this progression narrative as applied to the experience of women is one that is connected to an essential labour-economy: it suggests that if women are willing to put in the work to transform their selves, they will be rewarded – if not by money then with the promise of a more middle-class (and thus better-off) life-style.

This is perhaps particularly evident in the before-and-after images of cosmetic surgery websites as in the following:



(Image from *123 Weight Loss*,  
<http://123-weightloss.blogspot.com/2009/01/tummy-tuck-cost-in-usa-others.html> [accessed 16 February 2009])

The above before and after images use a range of devices to highlight the movement to a better lifestyle. In the first image we see the woman wearing a purple dress which is relatively simple in style and make, suggesting that it is used for every-day purposes. Significantly, she wears neither make-up nor jewellery. The

woman is framed in front of a closed door, indicating that she is primarily bound to the home. The style of the door is relatively old-fashioned and suggests that the household cannot afford to upgrade their interior design. In contrast, in the second image the woman wears a black dress with a low neckline and silver empire line. The dress seems to be more befitting of a night out or a party than as everyday wear. The silver empire line indicates wealth by suggesting jewellery-like accessories. The woman is heavily made-up, again indicating that she might be going out. She is framed in front of a large French window with view onto a wooden patio with a lounge, suggesting leisure and relaxation. In total, the second image points to a life that is less domestic and focused around the home as a place of work, but rather suggests wealth and a more leisure-focused lifestyle. As I will indicate, a similar progression narrative can be found in other, apparently more positive representations of women.

My own research, which I am only beginning to develop, is interested in exploring the concept of 'real women' which became increasingly important from the mid-2000s onwards. This concept has been exploited by Dove with their 'real beauty' campaign, and can be increasingly found in television programmes aimed at women. These include *Coleen's Real Women* (ITV2, 2008 – present), and Gok Wan's *How to Look Good Naked* (C4, 2006 – present) and *Miss Naked Beauty* (C4, 2008 – present). The interest of all of these programmes and indeed the ad campaign is in offering a wider variety of representations of women: women in different sizes, primarily, but, as in the case of Dove, also of different ages and ethnicities. These representations seem perhaps particularly positive in the light of the Size 0 debate, and have indeed become increasingly focused on the idea of 'curves'. As the Size 0 debate has continued, emphasising the risk to one's health if a woman (and in particular a teenage woman) aspires to the ideal set before her by the fashion industry, the programmes have increasingly emphasised the 'sexiness' and 'naturalness' of women of a British size 14 (which is 5 sizes bigger than the American size 0).

Gok Wan's *How to Look Good Naked* in particular emphasises women with curves as 'gorgeous' as he often calls them. The programme seems to be inspired by Naomi

Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1991) in that it often criticises the industry behind the pressures on women to conform to a particular stereotype and could therefore be construed as post-Naomi Wolf make-over television. Wan is particularly outspoken against what Wolf calls 'the iron maiden', i.e. the standard set by the beauty industry that emphasises a particular shape (skinny, tall and young) as ideal. Despite these positive elements, the show nevertheless perpetuates some of the beauty myth's key processes. Firstly, it offers no alternative to the representation of woman as body. Although the series discusses some aspects of the women's private lives, the emphasis is in general on them as bodies; bodies that look in a particular way and that can be transformed by particular items of clothing. Importantly too, the programme, like other postfeminist narratives, rely on a transformation and progression narrative that suggests there is a middle-class reward waiting for the women, if they are willing to put in the effort to transform themselves. This means that women's work is focused on the transformation rather than on the articulation of their difficult experiences. The promise of a better future furthermore silences demands that more needs to be done, and that other (and more political) aspects need to be addressed in order for women to become happier. The progression narratives of *How to Look Good Naked* essentially suggest that things can become better by transforming the body and therefore situates the problem of women only in the (personal) sphere of body image rather than in the more politically pertinent realms of unequal labour relations and unequal distribution of work in the home. I would therefore suggest that these progression narratives actually function to silence women's protest, a fact that is exaggerated in *How to Look Good Naked* because the main person articulating the women's experiences is a man.

However, it would be too easy to simply dismiss the programme as problematic. This is particularly important in the light of earlier feminist research which failed to engage with different women's pleasures and desires in an adequate way (for a detailed discussion of this see for example hooks, 1982; or Boyle, 2005). In other words, I believe it is important that we recognise that these programmes are popular and are celebrated by a number of women as liberating. So in many ways, I want to follow Bartky's example (1997/1988) and highlight the complexity of women's

engagement with and effort in traditional femininities in order to fully come to understand what these programmes offer. Whilst this inevitably means that my project will have to put a large emphasis on female audiences, I here already want to draw attention to the complexity and, to use Fiske's term (1987), polysemy of the text itself.

In order to do the programmes full justice, I believe it is necessary that we critically evaluate the text in relation to more elements than just narrative. I here want to examine the text as light entertainment and make use of the model that Richard Dyer proposed in 1973. He highlights that light entertainment offers a utopia which is based on binary oppositions which structure the text's relationship with its major audience group. Thus, Dyer argues that light entertainment offers abundance, luxury and leisure in comparison to the limited resources, poverty and work that the audience encounters in their day-to-day lives. Similarly, *How to Look Good Naked* offers utopian pleasures that are based on the opposite experience of the women watching. The programmes suggest a world of pampering instead of the work of 'managing home, time, work, and their commodity choices' (Negra 2009: 5). Similarly, the women are offered the space to think only of themselves rather than having to put everyone else first. Thus, the programme actually works against traditional femininities if we consider that these also structure women's relationships with other people. More importantly, perhaps, is that the programme offers women the space to articulate their frustrations, even if these are articulated by a man. His widely publicised homosexuality and background which suggests that Wan himself struggled with body image issues, however, help bring Wan into the realm of feminine experience and hence close to both the women on the programme and the women at home.

In relation to narrative, what is often overlooked in these programmes is although they do present transformation and hence progression narratives, the programmes, because they are series, also present circular narratives. Every week we return to find another woman in need of pampering and help. Transformation is therefore presented as only available to the individual, suggesting that the experience of

women with low self-esteem in relation to body image is actually the norm. It highlights women's negative experience at the same time as offering temporal relief from it. Importantly, this is only temporal: by returning to the beginning at the end and by constantly summarising the women's original experience in the short recap moments after the commercial breaks, the programme emphasises how easy it is to return to these feelings of low self-esteem and how normative this experience is. By returning to a similar case the next week, the programme moreover suggests that the transformation achieved in the last programme was only of temporal duration for the audience and needs to be restaged in another example to offer further relief.

Moreover, the programme can only be successful as a series with a transformation narrative if it returns to another woman who experienced the same low self-esteem as the woman the week before. Thus, the programme offers a circular movement for its audience. For the regular audience the series provides a constant return to feelings of low self-esteem which are worked through to develop a better and happier self, only to return to feelings of low self-esteem the week after. It is this circular movement for the audience that needs further exploration, particularly in the light of feminist criticism that highlights that the circular movement in narrative is actually closer to women's experience than the progression narratives of modernism (for a more thorough discussion of circular narratives, see for example Spender, 1982).

In conclusion, the programmes discussed here clearly offer a more complex picture than a simple celebration of traditional femininities which are now broadened up to include a wider variation of representations of women. Rather, they present highly complex engagements with current debates around traditional femininities and the work needed to participate in them. In order for us to uncover these complex structures, I suggested, we need to analyse these texts from more perspectives and take into account other and non-feminist scholarship that is more interested in form, and in historical audiences. Whilst I have not been able to address aspects of audience studies due to the fact that this research is in its very early stages, I nevertheless hope to have shown how complex the text actually is,

offering a polysemy which can be negotiated by different audiences. So I want to finish by asking two questions:

- A) How can we do full justice to the complexity of these narratives without losing sight of our political goals? It is important that we do not simply embrace these programmes because they offer pleasures to women; rather we have to remain critical and understand the complex relationships that women have with these programmes that go beyond aspects of pleasure. And the second question is, derived from the above,
- B) Can we provide alternatives? I do believe that we need to intervene in the debates in order to offer alternatives to the narratives that highlight women's experience as those revolving around bodies. Women are more than bodies, and women's lived experience cannot simply be reduced to issues around body image. So how can we intersect? The Women's Libraries try to do that already with their project on historic 'real women'; but more work needs to be done, and I would like to suggest that we might have to become more involved in practice as research in order to more effectively intervene in current debates.

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## **MeCCSA Women's Media Studies Network**

The Women's Media Studies Network is intended for all women researching and teaching in media studies, film and media practice and production areas. It aims to raise the profile of women in these disciplines and promote the research women do. It is also establishing links with other women's associations in the field and with relevant journals both nationally and at international level.

Further informations about its activities are available on the MeCCSA website at

<http://www.meccsa.org.uk/womens-media-studies-network/>